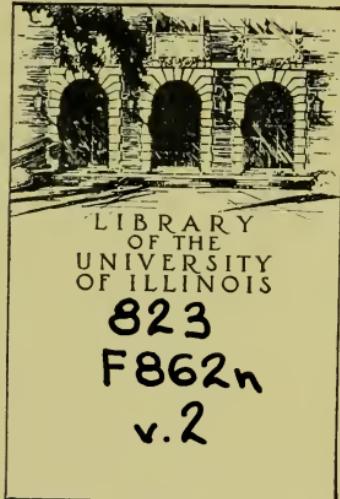




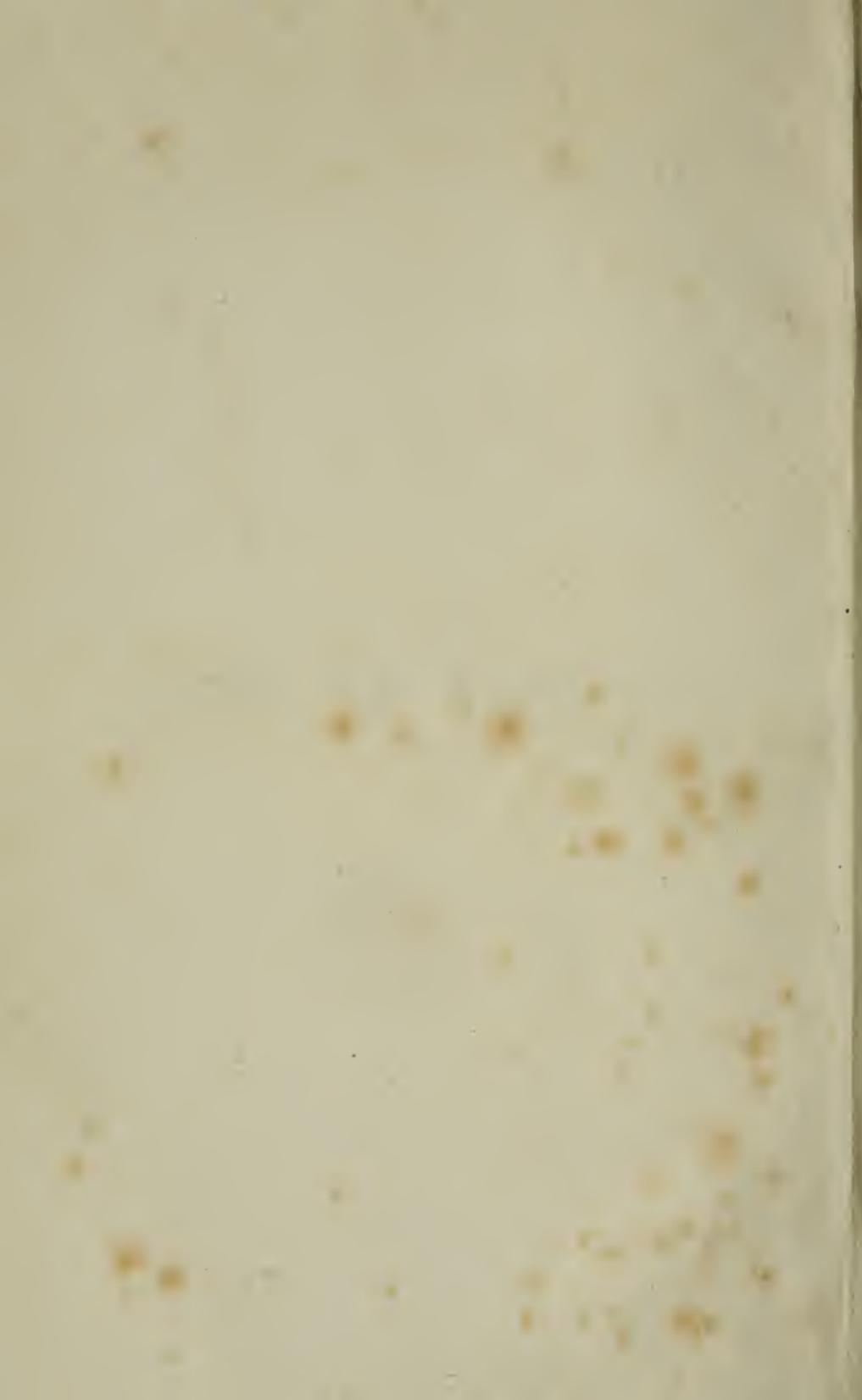
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NOT WHILE SHE LIVES.



NOT WHILE SHE LIVES.

A Novel.

BY

MRS. ALEXANDER FRASER,

AUTHOR OF "FAITHLESS," ETC.

"Omnia vincit Amor,
Et nos cedamus amori."

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. II.



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NOT WHILE SHE LIVES.

CHAPTER I.

VIOLET.

“ No, the heart that has truly loved never forgets,
 But as truly loves on to the close,
As the sunflower turns on her god when he sets
 The same look which she turned when he rose !”

Moore.

“ Speak of me as I am ; nothing extenuate,
 Nor set down aught in malice ; then, must you speak
Of one that loved not wisely but too well !”

Shakespeare.

HE ELMS, in Lincolnshire,
had been the family seat of
the Chestertons for many
and many a year.

A stately and antique mansion of dark stone, with square turrets and old-fashioned windows, owning a large park, in which troops of slim-limbed gazelle-eyed deer were to be seen. Vast extended lawns stretched right and left, like gigantic sheets of vivid green, with tall forest trees clumped together upon them; here and there, amongst the sylvan shades and romantic situations, gleamed a temple or a statue, mutilated, moss-covered, dank with damp and age. A superb avenue of majestic elms reared themselves on one side of the house, terminating in an old pavilion, before which lay a "bassin" of clear water, in which the neighbouring shrubs admired themselves. Masses of geraniums were planted round the low parapet, mingling their bright scarlet

petals with the fragile white blossoms of the azalea, and the deep dark foliage of the laburnum, “dropping-wells of fire,” or hanging out its clustering flowers like a golden prize above the heads of the other plants.

Maidenhair flourished, and lichens of every description crept insidiously into the crevices and interstices of the broken stonework. It was the prettiest and most picturesque little bit of landscape imaginable, and would have made a glowing subject for Turner; and in addition to its beauty, it possessed the charm of a pleasant seclusion from the rest of the place. The last advantage was possibly its principal attraction in Violet’s eyes, and she would spend hours seated there, solitary and sad.

In one short hour all her happiness, all her hopes, had dwindled and faded into nothingness.

“Married!” Oh, how that word, that had sounded the death knell to everything, kept ringing in her ears.

She had not even the comfort of being able to cherish inwardly, at any rate, the love that she could not avow outwardly. He belonged to another woman, and she dared not let her memory linger around him, without committing a deadly sin! How implicitly she had trusted in him, to have her faith rewarded thus! Ah! never again could she trust or love any one, for if *he*, whom she had likened to perfection, could prove thus unworthy, who else in all the world could be deserving? She knew right well that her duty was clear before her, that she ought

to pluck away every root of the love that yet clung with such wonderful tenacity to her heart; but how was she to set about the task? Death itself would have been a more acceptable boon than the life that Providence had restored to her, from which all, that made it valuable, had been wrested. She felt that she must forget him, that she must learn to hear of him with indifference, and yet each fibre of her frame, each chord in her soul, vibrated to the slightest sound of his name, ever so lightly spoken!

Instead of hating him, or despising him—instead of resenting in virtuous indignation the apparent duplicity of his conduct, the *coldest* feeling she could bring herself to feel for him was pity, the pity that is akin to love! And this

was but womanly on her part, after all. When Abelard was to blame, did not Eloisa love the offender, yet detest the offence?

After that miserable interview in which Maurice's own words had corroborated the truth of Letty's statements, Violet had fallen ill, so ill that for a while her very life had been endangered; but youth and a good constitution had asserted themselves vigorously, and cheated the tomb of its prey; and in the first days of convalescence her people took her away from the place that spoke to her of him, and in which everything tended to recal the unhappy circumstances of her acquaintance with him.

Amidst the quietude and loveliness of the Elms, Violet, according to the usual reasonableness of women, sought to regain

her peace of mind, by continually brooding over the past! She was strong enough now to stroll unaided through the grounds, and when wearied she rested herself in the spot that has been described, repeating over and over again, verbatim probably, for love brushes up the memory, as a rule, each sentence that had been uttered by the lips that she dared not look upon again.

Then she opened a volume in her hand, and her eye unconsciously wandered over the leaves, falling on the titlepage—“The Legend of the Syrens.”

“The habitation of the Syrens was in certain pleasant islands, from whence as soon as out of their watch tower they discovered any ships approaching, with their sweet tones they would first entice and stay the people, and then

destroy them. So great was the mischief they did, that these isles of the Syrens, even as far off as men could descry them, appeared white with the bones of unburied victims. For the remedy of this misery, Ulysses, who was passing that way, caused all the ears of his company to be stopped with wax, and made himself to be bound to the main-mast, with special commands to his mariners, not to be loosed albeit, himself should tell them to do so."

"And it was a woman like one of these that enticed him only to destroy him," the girl murmured sadly, closing the book.

"My darling, if you had *only* been strong like Ulysses, and resisted! But I love you in spite of all, though I may never be yours, never as long as she

lives! God forgive me!" she passionately muttered, "and guard me from the crime of wishing that no obstacle existed between us."

Drawing from her bosom a letter, she pressed it fervently to her lips for the hundredth time, while the big tears rushed into her eyes; then wiping them away, she began to peruse the lines that seemed to be her grief's sole balm, and each word of which carried with it a conviction of his sincerity and undying affection.

"Violet, I hardly dare to write to you, and yet I *must*! And if I wrong you further by doing so,—by the recollection of our love, our true and fervent love, you will forgive me!"

"A thing now of the past, Violet, would to God that I had never been!"

But away with thoughts of my own deep misery, let me only strive to clear myself a little in your dear eyes by telling you the 'true unvarnished' history of my life. You will think I have been wanting in honour and courage, not to have made my confession long ago; but oh! if you could divine the fulness of the delicious trance into which the knowledge of your love lulled me, you would wonder no longer that I was too great a craven to break by my own word and will the one blissful dream of my whole existence. When you know all, you may perhaps pardon me, feel for me, and not utterly despise me!

"I was but nineteen, Violet, inexperienced in the world, impressionable and trustful, when fate threw into my path

a woman, worthless but beautiful, who, taking advantage of my boyish passion and credulity, inveigled me into a secret marriage. She belonged to another man, even while she uttered the vows that bound her to me. She was ambitious with the vulgar ambition of the lowest class, and to become a 'lady' she must have sacrificed her own conscience and my whole life.

"*My wife, but in name only*, for I parted from her at the foot of the altar, still lives, and lives a life of infamy. Perhaps, in men's eyes, the tie that binds me to her would be invalid, for I married her under a feigned name; or even were it otherwise, her conduct for many years has been such, as would afford easy facility for a legal severance from her, and then I should be free

to wed another. But now, Violet, comes the hardest trial to me of all !

“ A vow, not lightly spoken to be as easily broken, but solemn, earnest, taken on my knees before God, in the first wretched hour of awakening to the knowledge of my wife’s sin, that not whilst she lived should act of mine sever the chain between us, keeps me fettered to her. I *dare* not break that oath, Violet, for if I did, I should fear that the Heaven I mocked would pour down its vengeance on the head I love best. Before you and I met, I never was tempted to forget my vow ; and when I had learnt to worship you, until it seemed to me that you and life were one,—that it would be death without you,—I yet strove to be silent, long, long after my heart

had cried out just for one tiny word of tenderness from those lips. I struggled fiercely, passionately with the growth of my feelings; but my whole soul was at your feet, and human nature could resist no longer!

“ My only consolation is a hope—a conviction — that you do not utterly hate me. It is indeed terrible to look to death, as the only thing that can bring us a life full of love and light ; and yet, amidst the dense clouds looming over the future, there is something within me telling of brighter days, when you and I shall be one, Violet, never, never to part again !

“ I dare not ask for one word of forgiveness or of love; but I feel that you will refuse neither to him who

only lives in the hope to clasp you once again in his arms!

“ May God in heaven bless you, Violet!

“ M. L.”

“ Maurice! Maurice! come to me! I cannot—I will not live without you! Or else, my God, let me die! What have *I* done—what has *he* done—that Thou shouldst be so hard, so cruel, so unjust? Merciful Heavens!” she cried, as the passionate paroxysm subsided, “what am I saying?” and flinging herself down on her knees upon the flowery turf, with the vaulted sky above her, and nature’s loveliest works around her, she breathed out a fervent prayer for submission to His will.



CHAPTER II.

EARL OF HARCOURT.

“ She is a woman, therefore may be wooed;

She is a woman, therefore may be won:

* * * * *

That man that hath a tongue, I say is no man,

If with his tongue he cannot win a woman.”

Shakspeare.

WERE it not wrong for mortals to question the justice and love of a mysterious and all-seeing Providence, we might often wonder for what reason misfortune is not more equally divided amongst the inhabitants of the earth; and that while some human

beings are allowed to bask occasionally in the sunshine of life, others seemingly as deserving of good as their more fortunate fellow-creatures, appear to be “born to sorrow as the sparks fly upwards.”

True, we are told that the “wicked flourish like a bay tree,” and that those “whom God loveth he chasteneth;” but it needs a stronger mind and a firmer faith than most of us possess, alas! to accept the crosses laid upon us with proper resignation; especially when we feel that those crosses have come to us through an untoward fate, and not by any fault of our own. The best consolation we can find, perhaps, is in the words of Socrates—that is, if we respect the wisdom of the darker ages — those days in which the march of intellect progressed far less rapidly than now, but when the world

was infinitely purer and better. And the Athenian sage wrote, that if all the misfortunes of mankind were cast into a public stock, in order to be equally distributed amongst the whole species, those who now think themselves the most unhappy would prefer the share they are already possessed of, before that which would fall to them by such a division. *But revenons à nos moutons.*

To Arthur Gordon and Lettice fell all the happiness that the Fates had denied to Maurice and his Love.

The two former were, in truth, making up for lost time, and were literally sunning themselves, like two bright butterflies, in all the warmth and light this mundane existence can yield; and if a wilful word or misconstruction of some trivial action —a passing spasm of jealousy, fierce, if

unfounded—some little attention forgotten—some tender phrase unsaid—brought a pout to the girl's red lip, or a shadow on the man's brow, the magical sentence, “Remember the past,” uttered on either side, would heal the breach at once. Like burnt children, they dreaded the fire. They were married a short time after the *fête*, at which they had made up their “lover's quarrel,” which, in their case, had only been productive of a renewal of love; and after a rather protracted honeymoon at the English lakes, they had settled down in the loveliest little home in the world—Silvernest, fit both in beauty and in name for such a pair of turtle doves to abide in.

Maurice, grieving still over the memory of the short glimpse of happiness that had been his, and rarely venturing to

look for any break in the gloomy aspect that the future presented, had been suddenly startled out of a species of hopeless dull apathy, into which he was rapidly falling, by a rumour that reached him from that which he knew to be an authenticated quarter—from Lettice Gordon herself. He had gone to Silvernest for a week or so, anticipating a pleasant change in the Gordon's society, from the slow, monotonous town life he had led for months. But if it was with a heavy, weary heart that he had commenced his journey ; it was with a heart, suffering tortures, that he retraced his steps.

Back to him, in the quietude of his own rooms, came the vivid recollection of that first delicious meeting beneath the shadowing trees, of the vows she had breathed, while the moon was forming

over her a pavilion of silver, as heart to heart, and hand in hand, they had pledged themselves to each other, in spite of anything that might arise. And he had been fool enough to believe that her words had not only been true but irrevocable!

And this rumour said that Violet, *his* Violet, whom his soul, if not his hand claimed, was about to perjure herself by wedding another. Recognising the utter helplessness of his position, feeling that his rival held the trump card, he threw up the only game that could make life worth having, and awoke fully to the consciousness that Violet was lost to him for ever.

It was not *cancan* this time but plain unexaggerated truth, that Vi Ches-

terton was really betrothed to another man ; whilst her heart, never swerving from its old allegiance, told her that Maurice, and Maurice only, was all the world to her still.

Henry, Earl of Harcourt, was immensely rich, passable in looks, and on very good terms with himself. He had first looked on Violet's youthful loveliness at a demi-juvenile Réunion some five or six years back. Habituated to the gratification of every desire, he determined, then and there, to have her for his wife at some future date, deciding inwardly that her regal type of beauty, was just the sort to become his coronet, and to preside at his table.

There was nothing to find fault with in the English nobleman ; in fact he was agreeable both to look at, and to speak

to; but his personal and mental qualities awoke no spark of liking in Violet's breast, save a sentiment of common friendliness; and yet when he offered himself for her acceptance, she accepted him. Accepted him merely as a balm for a pride that was daily, hourly insulted, by stinging taunts from her cold and worldly mother; taunts that hinted at a want of self-respect, nay even of a lack of religion itself, in clinging to the memory of a man who could never be anything to her—until at last the girl's naturally sweet disposition became irritable and soured. “Drops added to drops make an ocean,” and trivial annoyances tended to form such a sea of sorrow that Vi, failing in strength and spirit, could no longer defy the mother, who, coveting for

her daughter's imperial brow the Countess's coronet, never hesitated at doing or saying aught, that could assist in placing it there!

But Violet herself, in justice to her be it said, never exaggerated for one moment the value of the bauble which was within her grasp. "She marked its glitter, but never forgot the frailty of its nature," and she felt that if even its value was really what worldly folks represented it to be, it was yet too dear to be purchased at the sacrifice of every feeling she possessed.

And yet she accepted it, fancying that it was her destiny to do so. At any rate, it would give her a refuge from *home*, which in lieu of being an abode of peace, appeared to her at this time to present, in a small way, the tortures

of the Inquisitorial Chamber of olden times.

She could not, moreover, bring herself to contemplate *death* as her only ladder to real happiness, without a shudder. It seemed to her pure and unsophisticated mind, a crime of the deepest dye, a murder committed in spirit if not in the flesh, to think of Maurice as a husband at some future time, when *she* who stood between them should have turned from a life full of health and strength, into a miserable handful of ashes!

Fortunately for her, Lord Harcourt required a passive, gentle bride, rather than an imperious Xantippe, who would hold her own bravely, and probably run counter to his phlegmatic nature and even ways.

His delicate attentions, his costly pre-

sents, were all acknowledged by Violet with an attempt at gratitude, and a smile, as utterly unlike her former beaming ones, as shadow is from substance.

But she never misled him for a moment. As Arthur Gordon had averred long ago, "she never flirted like other women;" and now she was grown quieter than ever. She scarcely even tried to conceal her thorough indifference from him, although she was patient under his assiduities and yielding to his wishes.

She had said to him on the day he proposed, with no sign of a flush on her cheek, no shyness in her eye such as "love" would have lent to them, but with a calm and composed manner, while her heart was throbbing painfully and her hands grew icy cold

in the act of rivetting their own fetters—

“Lord Harcourt, I will be your wife if you wish it! But I warn you that I have no heart to give. Whatever heart I had, died long ago, when I first learnt the bitter lesson that falsehood in this world is the paramount feeling of human nature, even in those who look so truthful and so good!”

And he had replied good-naturedly—

“Violet, never mind about the heart—it will revive! You are rather young to take so morbid a view of life; but I shall hope to be the one to prove to you that deceit is not inherent in every one. Yours must have been a very unhappy experience; I suppose a man can be sincere enough

if he really cares for a woman ! Now, Vi, call me 'Harry,' and give me your hand, and I'll swear upon it, that if it is ever in my power to make you happy, I will do so!"

"Thank you for your kind words. I'll try and be a good wife to you; but as for 'happiness,' that is not to be had in this world," Violet said in a trembling voice, with a big tear shining in her brown eyes, that made Lord Harcourt regard them with redoubled admiration ; and he congratulated himself inwardly, on having at last found some genuine feeling united to exquisite beauty, when all his experience hitherto had been amongst the puppets of society—the pretty automatons taught to preserve their

complexions, but not their hearts from stain or soil. Violet standing there beside him, had meanwhile forgotten his very existence, lost in one terrible vision—the severance of the very last link that bound her to Maurice Lynn! And she started visibly when Lord Harcourt, clasping and kissing the hand she had unconsciously extended, awoke her out of her momentary oblivion.

Lord Harcourt was neither obtuse nor a fool, yet he never noticed the girl's preoccupied manner, and coldness towards himself; but left her, impressed with the notion that the bride he had won, wanted just a little rousing from the depression that country life always engendered in him. The Elms was certainly a fine old place, but the house had not half the advantages of

White's or Boodle's; the trees and grass, and the statues and temples, looked damp and a little neuralgic, he thought, and were not half as amusing as Piccadilly or Pall Mall. If people wanted flowers and things, why couldn't they go to Covent Garden for them, instead of burying themselves in an out of the way spot like Lincolnshire! He would take Violet to town as soon as he could, and bring her round to a healthy view of life, and to his own sensible ideas of where happiness was to be found upon earth.





CHAPTER III.

AMONG THE CHORUS SINGERS.

“ I hold it true whate’er befall,
 I feel it when I sorrow most;
 ’Tis better to have loved and lost
 Than never to have loved at all!”

Tennyson.

“ Si che chiaro
 Per essa scenda della mente il fume !”

Dante.

MORE than a year had passed away, and Maurice had recovered, to all outward appearance, his normal serenity. “ He was fair in calamity,” as the Persians

in their flowery language apostrophize the man who bears sorrow bravely. Cicero says that not to feel misfortunes is not the part of a mortal, but not to *bear* them is unbecoming a man. And before indifferent eyes Maurice bore up wonderfully. It was only in the weary night watches, when lying sleepless, restless for long, long hours, or else awaking hurriedly from feverish visions of her to whom his every thought still pointed, in spite of reason and of will, that he would start up and pace up and down his chamber, whilst a weight of immeasurable misery would seem to crush him to the very earth, and his soul would revolt against all the world.

During this time he drank deeply indeed of the waters of Marah in

all their bitterness, and time, instead of bringing him sweet healing on his wings, neglected to bring him the only thing he wanted—oblivion. If he could but have tasted of the Lethean stream even for a little while, just to have gathered fresh strength for his struggle with misery! He led a more studious existence than ever, wrapped up in the books that had again become his only companions.

His countenance had altered considerably during these trying twelve months, showing a delicacy and fragility that were painful to the friends who felt interested in him; but he refrained from murmuring, or even complaining, and tried to persuade himself that his health was excellent, and that he suffered no more than other men did; and that

after all, if his life was full of thorns, yet, like “a rose tree, it had once borne the sweetest and most brilliant of blossoms.”

* * * *

It was a Gala night at the Italian.

Boxes and stalls, even to the pit, overflowed with the *crème de la crème* of the *grand monde*, presenting an effulgence of beauty and fashion that is rarely to be seen.

Several members of English royalty graced the house with their presence ; and here and there the dusky countenance of an Eastern potentate showed up beneath the gleam of his jewelled turban, varied by the olive face of a Turkish Bey, surmounted by the inseparable Fez. To the dazzled eye it looked

like a surging sea of diamonds, lace, and satin.

It was a representation of Goethe's *Faust*, "by desire," put on the stage with all the scenic splendour imaginable, and in the impersonation of which Mario lavished on the delighted audience all the lingering sweetness of his pristine notes, and Lucca's witching voice as "Marguerite" brought down showers of applause.

Maurice, a bit of a dilettante, passionately fond of music, and possessing a very tolerable tenor of his own, had relinquished his manuscripts for a few hours, not in search of excitement or amusement, but for the gratification that he really felt at the Opera. He stood alone in an interlude of the piece, near his stall, heeding

no one, and scarcely looking to the right or left. Good music possessed a soothing charm for him, and left his mind calmer and happier, even after its strains had long died away.

Suddenly his attention was attracted by the arrival of a party consisting of two ladies and a gentleman, in a large private box that was in close vicinity to him.

With a beating heart and a pallid face, he recognised in the younger lady the object of all his thoughts, —Vi Chesterton. She never saw him; but, seating herself quietly far back, fixed her attention at once upon the stage, from which the curtain was again rising.

Maurice, with cheeks as flushed as

an instant before they were ashen, and with his hands tightly pressed together, sat gazing upon her, as though a basilisk enchain'd his eyes instead of one of the loveliest forms on earth. And as he looked and looked, with the watchful jealous glance of a lover, and marked the cold indifference with which she treated Lord Harcourt, whom he knew by sight, oil seemed to pour gently on his wounds, and the conviction came to him, that in weddin' another her hand, and not her heart, would be yielded up. It was the first time he had seen her since they had parted, and he failed not to note with a secret satisfaction — of the inhumanity of which, he was himself aware, and a little ashamed—that a startling change

had come over her whole appearance.

Those bright dark eyes, the beautiful twin stars that were wont to shine so radiantly upon him, were lovely still; but a weary, mournful expression overshadowed their light, and all the *fire* of her look was gone.

She sat pale, spiritless, with a cheek almost whiter than the rose whose snowy petals nestled amidst the braids of her hair; and Maurice had the consolation—the base unworthy consolation that weak, faulty human nature always feels—of knowing that at any rate he did not suffer alone!

He had seated himself mechanically, when the second act began, but not a note of music reached his ears. Had devils been shrieking discordantly there,

he would have heard them no more than he did the volumes of divine melody that rang out upon the silent House.

Every nerve within him seemed strained to painful tension, listening for the faintest sigh that might arise from his dear love's breast. He was so near to her, and yet so far! unable to speak to her, to touch the hem of her garment, when he would have willingly given up one half of his existence to be vouchsafed a word, a glance, of the golden time gone by!

It was agony to sit there, still greater agony to know that ere another hour had waned, he might never see that beloved face again, excepting in his dreams—that the star of his life would set that night for ever and

ever to him. The sight of her had utterly undone him, reviving in all passionateness the feelings that had never died, but, like the waves of the ocean, had only been lulled to temporary quietness, by a deceitful calm. He felt as if he was going mad! And then a hand was pressed upon his shoulder, and Arthur Gordon's pleasant voice said in his ear—

“ Maurice, old fellow! so glad to see you here. We have a Box to-night, but you never even turned our way. Letty wants a chat with you.” And he linked his arm through Lynn's and drew him through the door.

Maurice could barely stand. Pale as death, even to his trembling lips, with the startled look still in his eyes that had come into them, when they had first fallen upon Violet, he tried to

articulate a few words, but it was useless, and throwing himself down on a seat in the corridor, a momentary faintness came over him that he thought was death.

“ Maurice, why what’s the matter? Here, have some sherry.” And Gordon forcibly poured the wine down Lynn’s throat, almost choking his friend in his anxiety. “ Speech is silver, but silence is gold;” so Arthur preserved his own counsel, and ignoring all knowledge of Vi Chesterton’s proximity that night, kept to himself his own suspicions as to the cause of Lynn’s indisposition. Waiting quietly until the fit of weakness had passed over, he said, taking a “pass” out of his pocket—“ Look here, I got a fellow to do the needful with Gye. I wanted a closer inspection of

the Lucca, who holds royalty in her chains, they say; so come along, *mon cher*, or we shall be too late."

The two men traversed the *coulisses* and stationed themselves at one of the wings by which "Marguerite" would wend her steps, on to the stage.

Near them stood a group of five or six chorus-singers, tawdry with tinsel, bedaubed with powder and paint; some blondes, some brunettes, and all as totally different in reality, from the appearance they presented on the boards, as "chalk is from cheese."

Never in any case is the old adage, "Distance lends enchantment to the view," so verified as in theatrical women. Who could recognise the dirty, slovenly drab of the morning, transmogrified into the "Spirit of the Ocean"

at night, with seaweed, and coral, and lilies, crowning the long false tresses; jewelled wings fluttering airily behind; and paint filling up the hollows of the livid cheeks and lending a lustre to the eyes, weary with nightly exertion or unholy orgies? Among the figures arrayed in effective costumes of rainbow hues, and glittering with silver and gold, was a woman of about thirty, but bearing upon her the impress of greater age, from the emaciation of her form, and an extreme attenuation of feature, that contrasted painfully with the flaunting colours of her attire. The cosmetics that she had applied, had failed to fill up the wrinkles under her eyelids; but the eyes themselves were beautiful, and of a peculiar shade, and rich masses of ruddy hair

fell down her shoulders in artistic confusion.

Turning her head suddenly, to look at the invaders into Thespian mysteries, and on whom her companions were remarking, those peculiar eyes met Maurice Lynn's ; and at once—in spite of the alteration that time had made in both—Husband and Wife recognised one another !

The next moment Gordon felt a nervous clutch upon his arm, like an iron vice, and the strange face of the chorus singer peered eagerly up into his own.

“ Was that Mark Leslie with you just now ? ” she whispered in a hoarse, excited tone, flashing a quick, fierce glance into his countenance.

“ Speak quick, I say ! ”

“ My good woman,” Arthur said slowly, drawing his arm deliberately away from the grasp of her long, bony fingers, “ the gentleman with me was Mr. Maurice Lynn.”

The next moment he could have bitten his tongue out, for having mentioned the name, and he inwardly anathematized that most unruly member.

“ Maurice Lynn! And yet I *can't* be mistaken,” she muttered audibly. “ I could swear to him in ten thousand. Oh, sir! where does this Mr. Lynn live?” she implored; but before Gordon could make up his mind what answer was the most discreet to give, after the *lapsus linguæ* he had already been guilty of, a vociferous call for “ Miss Lucilla Warington” sounded close by, and she was forced to “ fall into the ranks.”

Gordon stood transfixed, watching the receding figure of his extraordinary interlocutor, and wondering what possible interest such a creature could have in his friend. Lost in abstraction, he missed the real object of his visit behind the scenes, for Lucca passed him, unnoticed and unheeded.

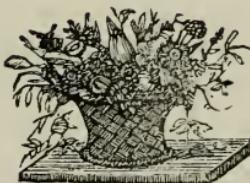
During the colloquy between him and the chorus singer, out of the Opera-house, through the streets, rushed Maurice, flying as though a hundred fiends were in pursuit, and never stopping until he was ensconced in his own sanctum. He had looked upon that face, that he had hoped never to see again—the face that had lured him but to destroy him;—but how different was the aspect it presented to his eyes now, to what it had done in other days! As repulsive now,

as it was resplendent then, in its deep tints and materialism. The eyes that he had deemed so lovely, now “shone like corpse-lights over the grave of his hopes” with a glare that was horrible to him to look upon; the “vermeil tinctured” lips that he had caressed, had become so full, so gross, so repellant to his jaundiced gaze, that he would have died, sooner than have touched them! and the sunlit tresses that he had been wont to worship, wore to his distorted imagination the aspect of Medusa’s head, wreathed with serpent coils!

Up and down, up and down—traversing the room like a wild beast in the terrible emotion this sudden meeting had produced—trying to shut out from his eyes the vision they had seen,

striving to drive out of his ears
the old discordant laugh—but all in
vain!

The next morning he left London.





CHAPTER IV.

YOU DO NOT LOVE HIM, VI!

“ Still the question I must parry,
Still a wayward truant prove;
Where I love I must not marry,
Where I marry, cannot love !

Love will never bear enslaving,
Summer garments suit him best;
Bliss itself is not worth having
If we’re by compulsion blest.”

Moore.

“ Je ne vous aime pas,
Je n’en saurois dire la cause,
Je sais seulement une chose,
C’est que je ne vous aime pas.”

Bussy Rabutin.



ETTICE GORDON made the prettiest and most sedate little matron in the world. All her small coquettishness, harmless at

their worst, had fallen to the ground on entering the “bonds of holy matrimony.”

Marriage had wonderfully strengthened her love and admiration for Arthur, and he stood on the very highest point of the pinnacle of perfection, on which her imagination had long ago placed him. Heaven had bestowed on her a child too, the veriest cherub! with golden rings of hair framing a chubby, rosy face, like one of Raffaelle’s angels, and a pair of true-blue orbs, just like his mother’s; and he ruled with a tiny but unlimited sway the household, that possessed all the elements necessary to make of it an earthly Elysium. One drawback Letty had had to the fulness of her supreme content: Violet Chesterton, her dearest friend,

had never seen the glorious beauties of her Highland home, or witnessed the perfect happiness of herself and Arthur. But the small thorn in her side had at length been withdrawn, and Violet had come to pay her long-promised visit. Vi was not looking well, and Lady Chesterton's maternal solicitude regarding her daughter's good looks had been uncomfortably aroused, by the sight of the unbecoming pallor on her cheeks, and the extreme slightness of the figure, that was wont to boast a rounded symmetry like that of Gibson's Venus.

So Violet was despatched to the kind offices of the Gordons', in order that she might win back, by the aid of the mountain air, the rose-bloom to her face, and the light to her pensive

eyes; and that she might "enjoy herself," as Lady Chesterton termed it—"an insult and an injury both," for she knew full well that the girl's heart was breaking slowly all the while.

It was certainly not the aristocratic lady's fault, but rather her misfortune, that Dame Nature had implanted so much of worldliness and hardness in her; but she might have toned down and "rounded" her sentiments a little, so as to make them less wounding and sharp.

Violet shrank back like the sensitive plant, at the rough home-thrusts and rude handling of her griefs, and she longed to get away from her uncongenial home, no matter where, as long as she could find "rest" and a little peace, before the dreaded hour of her

“sacrifice”—for it was by this name that she inwardly designated her approaching marriage. That sacrifice once completed, her very thoughts would belong to her husband, and not to herself; and yet those thoughts, those memories, were all she valued in the world. Lady Chesterton had, with her usual diplomacy, arranged that Lord Harcourt should follow his *fiancée* in a little time to Silvernest. She feared the influence that Lettice might acquire over the unhappy girl, away from his counteracting presence, and determined that, to avoid all future misgivings, the wedding should take place immediately on their return to town, which would be in the course of a month.

Meanwhile she was completely *dans son assiette*. Her head filled with glit-

tering visions of family grandeur, her days occupied with lawyers and settlements (Sir John never troubled himself about business when his energetic spouse was nigh), and her nights visited by dreams in which Madame Elise and wedding trousseaux formed the principal parts. But she never stopped to think that the chief mover in the splendid pageant that she was organizing would be like "a lamb led to the slaughter," preferring to all the satin and silver sheen that plain white garment called a shroud!

Those two or three weeks at Silver-nest, were all the respite the girl could look to; but she could not employ them otherwise, than by mournfully counting the hours that brought her closer to her doom, and as that came

nearer and nearer, her heart seemed to stand still with a desperate sorrow, and she could no longer conceal the bitterness of her misery.

Lettice endeavoured valiantly to shut her eyes to this state of things, fearing that matters had progressed too far, for her to arrest them; but her feigned indifference or blindness could not last very long. She could not bear the sight of that pallid face, those heavy eyes, and all her reserve suddenly broke down.

“Violet!”—It was one morning when the girl was looking more ill and downcast than ever, the very picture of woe-begone misery, trying to beguile her mind by playing with little Maurice (Lynn was godfather to the young scion of the house of Gordon), but in

reality only hiding her tears, as she bent over and repeatedly kissed the child—"It cuts me to the heart to see you so wretched. No, Vi, do not attempt to contradict me," Lettice said, vehemently, on Violet's gentle assertion that she was "quite happy." "I will not insult you, Vi, by supposing that you are still grieving for Maurice Lynn, although since I have heard the story of his life from Arthur, I pity him far more than I blame him."—At these words Violet glanced up affectionately, and kissed the snowy hand of the little woman sitting there looking so wondrously wise, in all the dignity of a year or so of matronhood.—"But still, Maurice Lynn *is* a married man, and of course, knowing that, you could not let your thoughts dwell upon him!"

—And Violet heaved a deep sigh at the wickedness that was put so vividly before her, and inwardly questioned if her thoughts were ever apart from him!—“But you are miserable because you do not care for Lord Harcourt.”

“Yes, I do,” came a very faint answer, with a very small amount of decision in its tone.

“No, you do not; you do not love him as you ought to love a husband, as *I* love Arthur!”—and Letty pronounced the last part of her sentence in a triumphant voice, as though it were an indisputable argument in her favour, presuming on her small experience of matrimony to be a fit judge of the proper amount of adoration that a woman should bestow on her lord and master.

“Yes, but that feeling may come later, perhaps,” murmured Violet, looking infinitely more desponding than hopeful on the subject as she said so. “Harry is very good and kind, and promises me to do everything to make me happy.”

“Then ask him to carry out his promise at once by releasing you from your engagement. Do, Vi, darling! It is much better to remain single than to go to God’s altar and vow to do all sorts of things, which you will find it impossible to perform. Throw yourself on Lord Harcourt’s generosity while there is yet time, and evade a fate which may be miserable. Will you do this, dear?”

“But mamma! she will *never* forgive me.”

And as visions of Lady Chesterton's tall figure, drawn up to its fullest height, with an angry light flashing out of her "hard" eyes, and a cruel sneer curling under the thin-cut nostrils of her high patrician nose, rose up before the frightened girl, she literally shrank and cowered for a moment, and felt she could never brave all she would have to encounter, if she rejected the wealthy peer.

"Never mind your mother, dear! I am the last to try and put disrespect to maternal authority into your head, but everything has a medium, and it would indeed be hard to sacrifice all your life to worldly ambition. What a pity you were not a boy instead; Lady Chesterton would have had sufficient work on her hands then, for she would never have

rested until her son was Premier at the very least! Lord Harcourt comes to-morrow; and when I bid you remember that it is actually wicked to act as you are doing, and to swear to that which will be positive perjury on your lips, you will promise to speak to him, wont you?"

"Yes, Letty, I *will!* and Heaven guide me in the right path. I believe myself it would be much better to tell him that I am unworthy of him; only fit to be left alone, unloved and unloving—than to fulfil my word to him with the feelings that are in my heart. Oh! I am so unhappy!"

"My poor child! You will be better when you are free once more; and then perhaps some one may appear who will make you forget all the past, and

open such a future before you—a future as delicious as mine!"

"Never!" And that one little word rang out so piteously from the girl's pale lips, that Letty's eyes filled with tears; and, snatching up her baby, she danced off with it, into another room to conceal her sudden emotion.





CHAPTER V.

LETTICE, I AM FREE!

“ Away, away! you’re all the same—
A smiling, flatt’ring, jilting throng;
And, wise too late, I burn with shame
To think I’ve been your slave so long.

Slow to be won, and quick to rove,
From folly kind, from cunning loth;
Too cold for bliss, too weak for love,
Yet feigning all that’s best in both!”

Moore.

“ Men have died from time to time, and worms have eaten them, but not for love.”—*Shakespeare.*

SILVERNEST was wearing its prettiest garb. Down upon the hills and glades had come a summer shower; the flowers,

laden with moisture, drooped lowly on their fragile stems; each tree sparkled with liquid gems; a subtle fragrance rose up from the freshened earth, and mingled with the odour of the heliotrope and the dark-green myrtle; and the sweet scented petals of the China rose that grew in luxuriance on the grounds unfolded their crimson tints more fully to the eye. Each clump of pinks, each bower of woodbine, each border of heart's-ease, looked doubly lovely washed by the soft passing rain that had pattered down in diamond drops on the gravel-paths and emerald turf.

Under the canopy of a century old tree, whose wide-spreading branches sheltered alike from sun and shower, Lord Harcourt and Violet sat side

by side, but there was nothing in their attitude that would have denoted to the casual observer, the tenderness that their relative position might have justified.

True, his eyes were fixed upon her face, but that beautiful face was slightly averted, leaving only the chiselled profile exposed to his gaze; the sweet brown eyes were downcast, and the hand that should have been in her affianced husband's clasp, held a tiny sunshade, with the point of which she nervously played with the blades of grass at her feet.

Silence had been the order of things for some minutes. He, awaiting what she had to say, and she, not knowing how to commence the speech, that like most speeches in our Houses

of Parliament, had been most carefully composed, diligently learnt by heart, and almost entirely forgotten in the agitation of delivery.

“Well, Violet!” he asked at length, a little impatiently. Her visible hesitation had given a keener edge to his curiosity, and he was not a man to brook a delay in the accomplishment of any wish he had, without experiencing a slight ebullition of temper—“And may I inquire what this momentous conversation is, that you desired to hold with me?”

Violet turned red, then pale, felt what is more expressively than elegantly described by the term “*nohow*,” then took a sudden determination to call up her fast failing courage to a culminating point. She knew that on

the termination of the conversation to which he had rather jeeringly alluded, all the happiness of her future life was dependant; here was the only chance she would probably have of endeavouring to free herself from her hateful bondage, if she *could* but muster up sufficient resolution to be firm and frank, to wave aside her scruples at administering a wound to his vanity, or even perhaps to his heart. Surely *anything* would be preferable to the doom of having to act perpetual hypocrisy, and swearing to vows that she knew would be false as hell.

“Harry! you know you promised me once that you would do anything upon earth to make me really happy!” she said to him rather piteously, thinking to herself that she

had ventured on a very mild opening indeed, and hoping that she would be equal to stronger language if occasion required it.

“And in what have I failed? Have I neglected any one of the essential *petits soins*? Have not the best periodicals, the earliest flowers, found themselves punctually at your feet? Is not “Shooting Star” broken in to a nicety to carry you? Have I not secured one of the largest Belgravian mansions, an opera-box on the grand tier, a *maisonette* for the Derby and Ascot week? What on earth can I do more for you?” he asked in a pathetic, mortified tone, that struck her quick sense of the ludicrous, and almost brought a smile to her lips.

“ Yes, yes ! But”—and poor Vi paused, tapping her foot restlessly on the turf. She felt herself in the ignoble position of a regular dilemma. This was hardly the sensational scene she had expected, and to which she had tried to work up all her powers of finesse. She had been prepared to wage battle valiantly enough in a cause of the heart ; but instead of that valuable article being consulted, or even alluded to, she was being regaled with a sort of auctioneer’s catalogue of the property she would become possessed of as Lady Harcourt !

Was this man, ignoring her *feelings* completely, going through an interminable list of things that she did not care one jot about, and was he forgetting that with them she would have to accept

himself, which was what she wanted least of all!

How should she ever pluck up enough courage to speak boldly, when his very unconsciousness of the object she had in view was the greatest impediment placed in her path to enlightening him?

“ Harry, you *know* that I do not want all those things. I have never cared for what fine ladies consider necessary to a happy existence, and I seem to grow daily more and more indifferent. Oh, Harry!” and she looked up imploringly into his face, “ forgive me, but I *must* speak out! Cannot you see that I am very miserable—that I am ungrateful in not appreciating properly your kindness to me—in not valuing as I ought to do all you offer

me—lavish upon me? Let me go, Harry—let me be free! Choose some other woman infinitely more fitted to be your wife than I am—more worthy of bearing your name."

It was not often that Henry, Earl of Harcourt, was roused out of a constitutional apathy, or it might be a *sang froid* acquired by education, that characterized him in society, but now he entirely forgot his ordinary listlessness, and starting up from his indolent attitude, he stared at his betrothed in the most unfeigned astonishment. Did his ears deceive him?—or was it gospel truth that a woman actually existed upon earth who could not only resist the honour of having him for her husband, but who was positively imploring him for her freedom as earnestly as

though she were begging for a commutation of penal servitude for life!

She must be insane or foolish, he thought, or else she would scarcely give up all the worldly advantages he offered her, in her sober senses. Anger sparkled up in his steel-blue eyes, and hurt vanity lent a vivid colour to his sallow cheek. But with a strong effort he reassumed the nonchalance habitual to his manner, and restrained himself from giving vent to all the bitterness that filled his breast. It *was* very hard lines to be thrown over in this sudden cursory fashion without any preliminary warning, after a protracted engagement, that had been the gossip of the upper current, and the existence of which had been bruited far and near through the columns of the fashionable journals.

"I really do not understand you, Violet," he said, very gravely, after a short pause. "Is it that you wish to break off our engagement entirely, or is it 'time' that you require to reconcile you to marrying me, and to the fearful hardship of wearing a coronet?" and he sneered just a little as he caught her eyes.

The allusion to the coronet was a mistake. In his wrath, the well-bred Peer had made a lapse into snobbishness, that he himself repented of, the moment after it was uttered. At the covert sneer, all the latent pride in the Chesterton nature flashed up. Violet had never loved him, but as long as he had continued kind and gentle, her soft womanly heart smote her sorely for giving him pain: that sneer completely

turned the balance in his disfavour, and she answered him quietly, but very determinedly—

“ No, Lord Harcourt, it is not time that I desire, for no length of time would reconcile me to a coronet which would weigh down my heart whilst it adorned my head. I am very sorry if I have seemingly played fast and loose with your feelings ; but it is far better and wiser to have spoken now, even at the eleventh hour, than when it was too late. I can *never* marry you—or any one else,” she hastily added. “ Harry! do let us be friends, if we cannot be more. You said you would prove to me that real liking was unselfish. If you *do* care for me, prove it in the only way you can—release me from my promise, and

I will thank you with all my heart." And she looked very pretty as she clasped her two hands beseechingly ; but Lord Harcourt was in no mood to be moved into amiability by the beauty of the woman who had had the bad taste to reject him.

" Of course, Miss Chesterton," he replied, tartly. " I trust I am not fallen quite so low as to have to beg for that which is not willingly bestowed. I want a wife, and not a victim ! You are free from this moment, and I sincerely trust that you will not find out too late that you have ' decided in haste to repent at leisure.' I wish you good morning." And he lifted up his hat courteously, and walked slowly away with unfaltering steps, although there was certainly perturbation enough

in his breast to have made his gait unsteady. All the honey in his nature was turned into lime-juice. Notwithstanding the natural frigidity of his temperament, he had cared for the girl to a certain extent, in a fashion of his own, with nothing particularly gushing or effervescent in his feelings, but with a calm, quiet, equable affection that might perchance have ensured her happiness in the end more than a warmer but less lasting attachment.

Violet sat where he had left her—a weight was off her heart, and it seemed to have grown quite lightsome in comparison with the last few months. She could scarcely realize to herself that the irksome trammels that had clogged her spirits and crushed her health had fallen off and left her

“free”—for what? That was a question she dared hardly answer to herself, for it would have been—“To love *him* still, the only man that her heart had ever acknowledged as its lord!”

Lettice, coming out an hour afterwards, found her still on that garden seat, in a pleasant reverie, her face a mixture of tears and smiles, and the old glad tone ringing in her voice as she exclaimed excitedly—

“I have done what I promised you. I have told him that I cannot marry him—and oh, Lettice! I am free!”

* * * *

Twenty-four hours after his summary dismissal Lord Harcourt left town for Seville, where he hoped to encounter fewer prying eyes belonging to his

countrymen than in other more frequented parts of the Continent. It was likely to be some time ere he would regain his usual equanimity of mind, or recover the rude shock his *amour propre* had received. He had not gone in for much sentiment, and the wound in his heart was by no means a mortal one; but the unexpected *dénouement* of his visit to Silvernest had completely unstrung his nerves and *bouleversé* all his plans.

* * * *

It was the evening of the day on which Violet had freed herself, and the pretty smile of new-found liberty was still hovering upon her mouth, when Arthur Gordon, with an unusually grave countenance and

a telegram in hand, broke in upon her pleasant reflections. A message from Sir John, to the purport that Lady Chesterton had been suddenly stricken down with a severe illness, that gave but scanty hope of life.

Poor Violet ! her day-dream was dispelled at once. Remorse and self-reproach racked her soul. Her mother lay dying—perhaps dead—and her latest act had been one of disobedience, of rebellion against maternal will. She would go home at once, and if her parent was spared to her, she would sacrifice herself without a murmur and marry Lord Harcourt if he still wished it. But "*L'homme propose et Dieu dispose*"; and her good resolutions were futile. Before her hasty preparations for departure

were completed, a second message reached her—Lady Chesterton was dead!—dead, with vanity and worldliness clogging her soul to the very portals of the grave!

Vi had never been allowed to love her mother as many girls do, as she undoubtedly would have done. Her affection had always been thrust back upon herself, or repressed by a sneer at the bourgeois vulgarity of demonstrativeness, when the *convenances* exacted aristocratic apathy, and lady-like languor.

Still she was unutterably grieved, and mourned her mother as much, as if she had been a good one. All the hard words that had embittered her existence were forgotten; and amidst the shadows of death loomed up

many a virtue that the deceased had never owned—the mere offsprings of the softened feelings of sorrowing relations. How awfully small and valueless appeared the numerous strivings and strainings after social aggrandizement and pleasure that had so entirely monopolized the poor heart, now lying so cold! so still!—unconscious of, indifferent as to whether its final resting-place were a palace or a hovel.

“Dust to dust, ashes to ashes!”

If these few words lingered oftener in our memories than they do, how many a bitter pang we should be spared—how much more philosophically should we bear the brunts and knocks of the world!

Violet went back to the Elms, in time to see Lady Chesterton’s coffined

form lowered into the dreary family vault, with all the trappings and pompous ceremony that the dead had so loved in life; and then she and Sir John left England for an indefinite period.





CHAPTER VI.

MADEMOISELLE ZULMA VERNET.

“Love in a hut, with water and a crust,
Is, Love forgive us, cinders, ashes, dust!”

Keats.

“Alas! the love of woman!

It is known to be a lovely and a fearful thing!”

Byron.

IT was a quaint-looking, but very picturesque old château, the château of the St. Gé-rards at Versailles.

A square red-bricked house that presented a stone face, ornamented with

carved balconies and spiral columns, somewhat in the Italian style. The frontage had, in lieu of the ordinary principal entrance, three large doorways, surmounted with projecting portions, on the centre of which rested an elaborate bronze representation of the family crest —a crowned heart supported by a gauntleted hand. The interior of the spacious building contained huge dreary rooms, long bleak corridors, and tessellated flooring.

Right before the high mullioned windows, in the middle of a sloping turf mound, rose up an old fountain, all chipped and broken, but exquisitely sculptured with the design of three demi-nude nymphs holding vases in the shape of Roman urns, aloft. On the surface of the marble basin there re-

posed large white water-lilies, lovely when first budding out their pure virginal charms amidst their fresh and undulating leaves, thrice lovely when, with alabaster-hued petals fully expanded, they floated regally and gracefully, "pale with passion," with their faces turned upwards to meet the warm gaze of "fiery-eyed Phœbus."

The languid flowers of the château parterre bent beneath the fervour of the summer hour, whilst the deep dark-green of their foliage relieved the intensity of their glowing colours. ☺

Through the balmy air stole the fragrance of the starry-shaped parasite jessamine, entwining lovingly its long feathery arms around each neighbouring plant, and uniting its perfume to that of the rose, the peerless queen of

flowers, renowned for its sweetness since three thousand years ago, when the first of its species shot up from the earth, stained by the crimson tide of Adonis's blood.

A deserted and very neglected garden it was, after all, though as redolent in sense-entrancing odours, as if money and care had been lavished upon it.

Strewn across the ill-tended paths lay here and there long branches of straggling sweetbriar and honeysuckle, all tangled and bruised pitilessly under feet. On either side, wherever the gaze turned, all manner of flowerets, growing in native luxuriance, blushed through all the gradations of white to red ; blue-eyed blossoms peeped innocently out upon the lovely scene, and cinque-

foil, creeping stealthily along the grass, dotted it with tiny golden specks, that gleamed and glowed in the sunshine. The only living animated objects visible, were the “bright offsprings of air,” the gorgeously spangled butterflies. Now below, and now above, fluttering restlessly amidst the honeyed garden, soaring high up in their flight, sparkling their jewelled wings, or alighting on some sweet lowly chalice to repose and to sip.

But the butterflies, the sunbeams, the glorious fragrant parterre, were all a sad contrast to the internal appearance of the mansion. Within the château everything wore a look that conveyed a saddened feeling to the heart; a look of faded splendour, that brought painfully and mournfully to mind the

decay of a noble house, once rich in the wealth and indomitable pride of the old Faubourg St. Germain, some three-quarters of a century ago.

The tapestried curtains, woven with curious devices, that once might have been an honour to the Gobelins, hung tattered and soiled by the hand of ruthless Time. Here and there a magnificent Rose du Barri vase, or Louis Seize cabinet, inlaid with medallions of Sèvres or Dresden, mocked by its lone and priceless splendour the mean and almost poverty-stricken appearance of the general surroundings.

Tall-backed and comfortless Prie-Dieu chairs, elaborately embroidered in manifold hues that had blended unanimously into a neutral tint, but which had probably cost hours of labour to some high-

born ancestress, stood formally in uninviting rows against the wainscot of the walls, and the tessellated stone of the floor shone dull and neglected.

The owner of this grand but dilapidated property was the Count Adrien St. Gérard.

He was a man about thirty years of age, with handsome patrician features, and a figure considerably above the average height: unimpeachable in dress, irreproachable in manner, *distingué* in *ton*, and *chic* all over.

At this period he had been for some length of time what is slangily called “completely down on his luck.” There was not a single break, as far as short-seeing mortals could discern, in the black clouds looming over his fortunes. In fact, he knew full well that there

was but one event in the world which could reinstate him in the position of life his forefathers had held, and place him “square” with society, to which he believed himself thoroughly, to be both an ornament and a gain : that event was matrimony — provided, of course, that the bride had a considerable “dot.” But no signs of an El Dorado of the kind had as yet turned up on the cards. The truth was, that Versailles was no longer the gay and brilliant Versailles of some years back, when amidst its charming seclusions the beauteous and frail Du Barri held her rollicking and festive Court, and revelry and dissipation were the order of the day and night—when the monotonous plashing of the marble fountains mingled with the amorous whispers of

intrigue, and the fine old trees cast their shadows down as a screen for favoured gallants and unblushing dames —when royalty sighed abjectly at the *mignonne* feet of a wanton, and the sons of France aspired but to one thing, Pleasure.

Versailles had dwindled almost into the normal condition of its sister suburbs. Quietude reigned around, and feminine Crœsus's were as rare game in its sylvan solitudes, for a fowler's skill, as the wonderful phœnix of bygone times. In spite, however, of the Count St. Gérard's impoverished coffers, he found ardent admirers amongst the softer sex, and had even a *succès* amongst that class of human cormorants, French actresses, who are usually more clamorous than the renowned Shylock himself in vociferating for “pay-

ment in full" for every favour granted, or smile bestowed.

Adrien St. Gérard never sought for success:

“On dit que dans ses amours,
Il fut caressé des belles,
Qui le suiverent toujours,
Tant qu'il marcha devant elles!”

If a “*bonne fortune*” fell in his way he seldom hesitated to avail himself of it, always premising that “*le jeu vaut la chandelle.*” But he was no voluptuary; and his pursuit of, or rather his acquaintance with women, was more a habit in accordance with the loose morality of his time than from any overdue impetuosity of temperament and tendency towards libertinism. He was a *vrai Parisien*, possessing all the good and bad qualities that appertain to his nationality.

Completely *blasé*, as he frequently asserted himself to be, the noise, the gaiety, the perpetual *mouvement* of the French capital, were positively essential to his existence. He loved Paris, after the fashion of Montaigne, from high to low, from its magnificent monuments down to its lowest suburbs, just because it *was* Paris. The *summum bonum* of life in his estimation would have been Fortunatus's purse, with a five hundred franc billet, as unfailing as the widow's cruise of oil; to have taken his glass of absinthe at Tortoni's, his *petit dîner* at the Provençaux, to have smoked his fragrant Havanna on the Boulevards (although he was far too aristocratic to be a *flâneur*), and to finish up his evening on the exciting *tapis vert* of Frascati's. He was what the female world apostrophized

as a “Cupidon,” but a man utterly useless to his species, for hitherto his days had glided by without one serious occupation, or one real object or aim. There seemed to him but two things on earth worth living for—money, and “distraction,” to make the time pass. He had never dreamt of seeking genuine feeling, consolation, or devotion in a woman; a tear of real sensibility would have seemed to him an absurd superfluity, as long as the eyes themselves were well-shaped and lovely; and all he required from a pretty mouth were a set of pearly teeth, a little witty repartee, and beaming smiles. As to good or virtuous sentiments upon ruby lips, they would have struck him simply as a ridiculous and rather fatiguing *bêtise*.

On the whole his vices and virtues

might have been equally balanced. He had some of the wiliness of a serpent, but none of that reptile's ingratitude, that would sting the bosom that sheltered it from harm. He was no *chevalier sans peur et sans reproche*, but he was not either a Don Juan. The fashionable follies of society came as naturally to him as his *pain quotidien*, but his well-bred mind would have shrunk from anything so common and so vulgar as a crime ; and perhaps the very fact of his straitened finances had been the best preservative he had had from evil. He had in truth, probably from necessity and not inclination, renounced all extravagant pastimes and expensive toys *in toto*, when his mother, the austere old Countess, died, leaving him alone in the world, and “sole monarch of all

he surveyed"—namely, a mansion that was literally tumbling about his ears, and two faithful ancient servitors of the family, as the extent of his lordly retinue. But with the exception of a natural pang of filial regret, the demise of the old lady had not materially affected either his happiness or his comfort. Years before she died, she had been a rigid devotee, considering that a word or laugh lightly given was a dire disrespect to Heaven, and that mortification of the flesh was the only conducement to a healthy soul. She loved her son, but that love had been so pruned and regulated by her exigeant religion, that all its fervour was flown, and but a tame feeling was left. All her confidence, her conversation, was given to a shambling old priest who

was (in all proper respect) "*l'ami de la maison*" — all her devotion, and her thoughts, were lavished on an ivory crucifix that hung round her neck, and was perpetually pressed to her withered lips. The dismal atmosphere of the château was in no wise brightened by her sombre presence; but Adrien would have deemed it almost sacrilegious, to have intruded on the solemn tenor of her life by the presence of guests whose mundane notions and frivolities would have horrified beyond expression, the holder of a creed more approaching to fanaticism than sense or reason.

She had been laid in Père la Chaise, with the cherished crucifix beside her, for more than a year, and Adrien had begun to tire of the solitary existence out of

which even the one sable-clad form had faded.

It was on marriage that he looked as the grand era of a life that was embittered hourly, and utterly spoilt by a pitiful knowledge of hopeless poverty, and which was to turn gall and wormwood into a balm of Gilead that would heal up all old wounds and set him up for the remainder of his days.

Every now and then glimpses of a very epicurean state of life came to him in the fair city of Paris. But these glimpses only served by their contrast to render infinitely more obnoxious the state of his own exhcquer, and to present in a doubly greyer and duller form the aspect of his old home in the dreary château.

It was within a house situated in one

of the most fashionable “quartiers” of the demi-monde—a house small but “*parfaitement bien monté*”—that these glimpses of luxury came to Adrien St. Gérard.

A peep into the superbly furnished boudoir, heavy from the rare perfumed vapours, rising from the chased burners, showed rich silver and silken draperies of *bleu de ciel* falling over the windows in folds, and forming a sort of arras on the walls. Paintings, perfect gems of art, all more or less presenting subjects that were warm and glowing, hung between them; and statuary, nude and valuable, heaped everywhere, gave the aspect of a refined and elegant studio. Mirrors in ivory frames, candelabra in lapis lazuli, and cornucopiæ in onyx and biscuit, adorned the sculptured mantelpiece. From the ceiling that was

exquisitely painted in lozenge, each containing an episode in the manifold loves of Zeus, a nautilus-shaped lamp was suspended by burnished silver chains, and through the frosted globe the light fell softly and a little dimly upon the occupants of the chamber.

They were two in number.

Zulma Vernet was past the *première jeunesse*, but dress, and the skilful touch of art, completely concealed any ravages that time might have imprinted on her countenance. On a primary glance, she was beautiful as a Houri, or a Dream. On a second and more leisurely inspection, an acute and impartial observer might have detected some undeniable flaws in her “*physionomie*.”

The eyes were too wide apart, although they were of a lustrous brown and melt-

ing in expression, and their brows and lashes were perfect. The nose was a little too *retroussé*, but the nostrils were thin and finely cut. The mouth was large, but the upper lip was curved, and the lower one ripe and luscious. She was a woman on a large scale, with perhaps too much of fulness in her form, but yet as she stood there, in her black dress with its sweeping train, and a priceless Spanish mantilla falling over her hair, fastened on one side with one blood-red blossom, there was so much of exquisite grace in her careless attitude, so much of regal dignity about her, that it would have been impossible for the severest of critics to stop to analyse her defects, when her claims to admiration were so startlingly evident and her *tout ensemble* so alluring. She was *spirituelle* too,

and considering her birth and her status in the social world, she was refined and even fastidious in all her tastes and habits. She was quite a woman of the people, with no mysterious aristocracy hanging over her advent into the world. Her father had kept a petty gambling hell in the Palais Royal. Her mother had been a grisette of the Quartier Latin. But although many a student had often stolen a kiss from her pouting mouth, old Jacques Vernet up to his dying hour, had claimed undisputed right to Zulma, and had proudly watched her ascent to fame.

A popular actress at one of the most fashionably thronged Theatres of Paris, and a woman about whom the Parisian exquisites had gone mad, she could have had lovers at her feet every hour of the

day, and have enumerated them by legion ; but though she was a “professional” and attempted no display of prudery, or alas ! even morality, she was a woman, with a woman’s natural tendency to love one man *de cœur*, amongst the many aspirants to her favour.

Adrien St. Gérard was her companion.

He lay extended at full length on a sumptuous sofa, with a cigar between his lips. His eyes were closed, and his thoughts were wandering far away from the luxurious blue satin nest, within which he was enshrined as a deity, and installed in all the dignity of lover A 1.

He was not thinking of Zulma Vernet, nor of her matchless beauty and wit, although half the Jockey Club would have right willingly given some thou-

sands of francs to fill his place in that bijou of a maisonnette.

A short time before, he had been on a visit to a friend named Dubois, a rich landed proprietor of Versailles. Dubois was nothing but a *roturier*, but he had the reputation of being a good and worthy man, possessing a nobility of character which was equivalent to *pur sang* in the eyes of the old Count St. Gérard, who on his death-bed had commended his only son to his friend's kindness and friendship. It was during one of his frequent visits to the hospitable Maison Dubois, that Adrien had been introduced to an English pair, father and daughter, who had recently become tenants of one of Dubois' loveliest properties, and whom rumour loaded with wealth.

The Englishman was a haughty aristocrat, detesting plebeianism, pompous in manner, slow in delivery, and somewhat unapproachable to strangers. His daughter was a pearl of loveliness, and an heiress, and it was principally on this last and most substantial recommendation that the Count St. Gérard was ruminating so profoundly.

Zulma Vernet stood patiently watching for a considerable length of time, the reverie in which her lover was indulging, either forgetful, or else utterly regardless, of her very presence in the room. She understood Adrien's character from the top of his head *au bout du pied*. A man is never known so thoroughly in the domestic relations of life as he is by his mistress. With her he throws off all restraint, and

has no “silences,” such as he contrives to preserve, when occasion requires it, even to his wife.

It is at the house of his mistress where a man, and especially a foreigner, feels himself most “at home;” where he flings himself *sans cérémonie* with dusty boots on satin furniture, smokes unrebuked, the cigar that is interdicted elsewhere, and orders the dainty dishes that he prefers. He suffers *ennui* covertly in the presence of his better-half, but he yawns unreservedly in the very face of the Aspasia who belongs to him *pro tem.* He speaks openly, thinks audibly, and is exactly the same before her as he is by himself. It is a French author who says that if the mirror of truth be found anywhere, it is

probably within the boudoir of Venus.

“Tell me, Adrien, are your thoughts still with that *Anglaise* of whom you spoke at dinner? Is it her *dot* or her face that runs in your brain, *mon ami*? And yet no, I do not care to hear she is *ravissante*, for I should feel jealous. Jealousy is an ugly sentiment that my breast has ever been a stranger to, thanks to the *bonté* of the *monde*!” And as she spoke she walked to the sofa, and bent over him with a deep and searching glance, adding, in her tenderest, softest tone—“Surely no one shares your heart with me, Adrien?”

Adrien gave a final puff to his nearly consumed cigar, and deliberately removing it from his mouth, chucked the end negligently into a superb opal vase

that stood near him on a marble slab. Then he quietly turned round and faced her.

Not a single expression of tenderness could have been traced on his handsome aquiline features by the most adept of physiognomists. The deep blue eyes shone up with a cold and callous light, into the glorious melting brown orbs that sought vainly for a reciprocal look, and the accents of his voice were clear and calm and utterly passionless, as he replied to her question.

“Zulma, whatever heart I have is yours, but one cannot subsist upon love, *ma chère*. No one knows this better than *you* do, judging by the luxurious accessories surrounding you here. The English girl is not so beau-

tiful as you are, but she looks pure and good." And while he spoke there flashed before his mind the English girl's divine face, with its peerless features and expression, and her majestic figure, with its swaying grace and perfect symmetry, and he thought within himself what a desecration it was to compare the woman beside him, with her material attractions, to her who seemed to have become already the beau ideal of beauty and womanliness to him.

But these thoughts were all his own, and the Circe so confident of her powers, dreamed not of the real tenor of them. Nevertheless, he had said enough to irritate her ; the colour flamed up brightly into her cheek, her eyes shot angrily, and just for a second she looked positively plain, for—

“A woman moved is like a fountain troubled :
Muddy, ill-seeming, thick, bereft of beauty.”

And her usually well modulated voice rang out harsh and shrill as she reiterated his words—

“ Pure and good, indeed! Do you say that to insult me? For you know that *I* am not what fools call pure or good. Don’t you dare to taunt me, Adrien! You will try to marry this girl, *gauche*, ill-mannered, *bête*, as all those English misses are!”— Her companion sneered, shrugged his shoulders after the expressive manner of Frenchmen, then, after giving vent to the impatience he felt in an energetic but *sotto voce* “*Parbleu!*” composed himself into a comfortable attitude, and prepared to listen to her vehemence.—“ Yes, you will try and marry her,” she con-

tinued, speaking rapidly, and with her foot in its silken stocking and embroidered *basquine* beating a nervous tattoo on the floor ; “but it will be for her fortune, and not for herself. Ah, you think you can deceive me!—I, who know each turn of your mind, who read you like an open book ! And for an excuse for your paltry interested motives, you come here to prate idly of her purity, of her goodness. *Dieu !* I begin to despise you—have a contempt for you !”

A flush slowly mounted into the man’s pale cheek, and he bit his lip hard as he listened to her insolent words, and noticed her contemptuous gestures ; but he was too *insouciant* by nature to be roused quickly into recrimination, and he cared too little for her to take

much heed of her language, or her opinions.

“Zulma, you are going too far,” he said, very quietly, with an indifference in his tone that only served to vex her more, and lash her into greater fury. “You forget who you are speaking to. Your other admirers may think fit to bow to your tempers, but I am far too proud to subject myself to such scenes, and far too indolent to exert myself to retort; so as you are not *trop amiable, ma belle*, I wish you good night, and if we should ever meet again, I trust you will be more pleasant to look at, and to speak to!”

“Stay, Adrien, you shall *not* go. I have been your mistress for three long years, and I forbid you, do you hear? —*forbid* you to marry this girl.”

The Count looked up at her, and tapped his well-varnished boot with his silver-headed cane.

“Pshaw!—and why?” he asked, with an accent of astonishment.

The actress regarded him fixedly and passionately, then throwing herself on his neck, murmured softly—

“Because I love you, Adrien!”

“*What* did you say? But enough of this—let us finish this folly at once. You appear strangely to misunderstand the nature of our relations towards one another. Do you imagine that we are a modern Philemon and Baucis? If so, pray rectify your ideas on the subject as soon as possible, *ma chère*. The relations that existed between us yesterday are not forced to exist to-day. It is but the old—old story, acted in every

part of the world, in every phase of society, from the princes of the blood down to the miserable boors, and yet *you* do not seem to comprehend it. It is, that on this earth there are two classes of women—one class lovely, like you—lawless, like you, to whom a man gives either an hour or a year of his life, according to his own free will—a class that please him one day and disgust him the next, who have nothing to expect from him but attention sometimes, caprice and changeability always!—whom he takes up without any reality of feeling, and leaves without compunction or remorse. The other class are like the English girl of whom you speak, brought up in a good and holy home, surrounded by virtue and religion: to these a man gives his life, his love,

his respect, his name, and for these he abandons such as you! The one class are born to be our playthings for a time; the other our guardian angels for our whole existence! You have forced me to place these truisms before you, and now that you know my sentiments, perhaps you *will* let me go."

And rising slowly, he took his hat, and drawing on his gloves, lounged to the door. Zulma looked round and tried to find in his face some signs of relenting and indecision, but all was impassive as marble there, and there was no perceptible lingering in his step.

Her breast was torn by the conflicting elements of anger, wounded pride, jealousy, and the fiercest love; the only love that had ever given, in

spite of its attendant misery of fear and doubt, any reality of happiness to her tinsel existence of stage, and spangles, and hypocrisy. Without that love she fancied that she could not live.

“Come back, Adrien; *don’t* leave me like this,” she cried. “If my love for you makes me say aught that angers you, forgive me for the sake of that love!—for, Adrien, you know how I love you—adore you!—that there is nothing in the wide world that I would not sacrifice for you and your good, except the *sight* of you, and that I *must* have, or die! Give me your full confidence, and I will try to be only a friend; I will do all in my power to further any plan for your welfare. Come back!” she coaxed, in her sweetest and most plaintive tone,

pointing to a seat that was near her; “and after one kiss of pardon and peace, you shall tell me all that you wish.”

She had assumed a *pose* which would have brought down the House in applause had she been acting. It was so pretty, so poetical; and she had called up all the fire she could, into her lovely eloquent eyes, as she spoke to him, exerting herself as much to please and ensnare this unwilling captive in her chains, as though she had been the cynosure of an overflowing Parisian audience. It seemed to her at that moment, that there was only one thing worth striving or existing for—and that was the Count St. Gérard’s devotion. Her nature was perverse, like other women’s—coveting what was difficult to

gain, undervaluing or contemptuously rejecting what was willingly offered, and what was in reality the greater prize.

“*Ma bonne Zulma!* now you are yourself again,” he said, carelessly, barely touching her forehead with his lips, utterly ignoring the fact that a white hand was outstretched to clasp his, and lazily sinking into the comfortable fauteuil she had indicated.

“*I will tell you what there is to tell, and ‘silence’ is all I ask from you in return—the silence of the tomb—for a ‘scandale’ of any sort would frustrate everything, and ruin me entirely.*”

He saw that her mood was changed, that the falcon was transmogrified into a dove, that a few soft words would melt entirely the heart that might work

him grievous injury, if left in rebellion.

By an effort he looked tenderly at her, and whispered—

“ You must try and be brave, *mon trésor*, and wear a gay exterior even if your heart be heavy. I know you love me sincerely, Zulma?”

“ I do, I do!” she asserted vehemently, looking up beseechingly in his countenance as she added—“ And you, Adrien?”

“ Yes, of course I care for you; but still I *must* try and win the English girl, not hating her, but being simply indifferent to her—for I *am* indifferent to her, even as much as *you* can desire!”

Oh, Adrien St. Gérard! speaking thus, lying deliberately, when already visions of

that English wife seemed too dazzling, too good to be real !

“ *Mille fois* thanks for that assurance,” and an expression of genuine gratitude flitted over her mobile face, and lent a better, holier look to it than it ordinarily wore.

“ You know, Zulma, that my château is falling about my head—that I have no money ?”

“ But *I* have,” she interrupted, hastily.

“ The St. Gérards don’t accept money from women,” Adrien answered, haughtily, whilst he felt the keen indignity of such an offer from a courtesan, and his pride rose in arms at the bare idea of wealth from such a source, renovating his grand old home; but, dreading another outbreak on her part, he conquered his indignation and continued quietly—

“I have no prospect of wealth, and without money I cannot live. This girl can give me wealth—wealth to do up the old place, and to reinstate me in the position I am entitled to. It will remove the vulgar stamp of poverty that dishonours my family name, destroying like a weed, by its noisome growth, the fine old tree it clings around. Once I become her husband, all pecuniary troubles will be over. Then, my beautiful one! once free from anxiety and worry, I shall be more in the vein to be your very devoted!”

“Oh, Adrien! it is terrible to think of your marriage with another! If it were not for those silly prejudices of you aristocrats, I have the wealth you wish. I might have been Countess St. Gérard, perhaps!”

And she looked hard at him askance, to try and divine his notions on the matter. He stared at her incredulously, but seeing she was in earnest, he burst into a laugh that cut her to the soul. The next moment, recovering the natural good-breeding her preposterous proposition had made him forget, he asked her pardon, for his rudeness, imploring her to be reasonable, and to give him her promise of silence.

“ You are cruel to me—very cruel!” she sobbed; “ but I will promise to be silent—on my soul I will! But on one condition only—it is that once married, and the fortune secured, you and I shall resume our present relations—that no wife shall ever deprive me of seeing you!”

“ Agreed, *ma chère!* And now—my

letters—you will give them to me? Letters are dangerous things always; more mischief has arisen from feelings being put into black and white, than any amourette is worth. You have assured me so often that you learn all my pretty little sentiments by heart, that the letters must be useless to you. Give them to me now, Zulma—*do!*”

“Never!” she replied, whilst all the softness faded out of her countenance, and distrust distorted her features and made her lip curl up scornfully. “Never! They are my best companions in your absence, my only happiness in my solitary hours! They may be perhaps the one refuge to cling to amidst shipwrecked hopes—the single but all-powerful inducement for the ratification of a promise made by a faithless heart. Whilst you

are true to your word and let me see you as now, Adrien, those letters shall lie in their safe resting-place, deep as the love I bear you in my bosom. When you fail me, those letters shall find their way to your wife, as daggers to her trusting heart, and as avengers of broken faith and lying words, to one who will never submit to be scorned, trampled on, and dismissed from your presence like a pitiful hireling, without seeking at any rate the consolation that is to be found in revenge!"





CHAPTER VII.

“FEMME SOUVENT VARIE, FOL QUI S’Y FIE.”

“Dans les premières passions les femmes aiment l'amant; et dans les autres elles aiment l'amour.”

La Rochefoucauld.

“While memory holds a seat
In this distracted globe; remember thee?
Yea, from the table of my memory
I'll wipe away all trivial fond records!”

Shakespeare.

HE Count Adrien St. Gérard did not lack finesse.

“Savoir faire” and “savoir vivre” were rudiments of life that he was specially versed in.

If he had conceived a violent passion for the fair young Englishwoman, (who was no other but pretty Vi Chesterton, rusticating amidst the charming solitudes of Versailles, during the period of mourning decreed by fashion, for her mother's death,) he had sufficient control over himself, as well as the superior wisdom to keep the secret hidden far out of sight, within the innermost recesses of his own heart.

It would not have furthered his purpose at all to have played the devoted lover. Therefore all sentiment was disguised under a mask of languid yet respectful indifference, which in itself was a piquante novelty to one who had been accustomed throughout her existence to be the recipient of eager and *empressé* attention.

Adrien had not reached the age of thirty years without having thoroughly mastered the art of ingratiating with all whom it was his interest and his pleasure to conciliate.

To outsiders, ignorant of his matrimonial project, it would have appeared that Violet's father, and not Violet herself, was the main object of attraction to him.

In the course of all his days, Sir John had never fallen in with a companion so sympathetic to himself, as the wily French intrigant. Both men were narrow-minded, and in fact bigoted aristocrats *au fond*; both had the prejudices of “class,” developed to an inordinate degree in their breasts, and both repudiated in toto the doctrine that propounded the “Rights of the People.”

Trade smelt strongly and offensively of vulgarity to their patrician nostrils, and wealth that had been amassed by sweat of the brow and labour of the hands, was to their ultra refined notions, filthy lucre in its most literal sense, by the mere handling of which their white hands would be irretrievably soiled.

Thus possessing in common political principles and every-day sentiments, it was not strange that Adrien should have rapidly succeeded in establishing for himself the coveted position of *l'ami de la maison*, whose advent was invariably hailed with pleasure. During his occasional absences, and they were but few and far between, the Baronet, deprived of an opponent at his favourite game of chess, found the hours lagging

and wearisome, and Violet herself, unconsciously habituated as she had become, to the unobtrusive attention that never startled her by tender word or glance, but simply demonstrated itself by acceptable offerings of the newest music, books, or exquisite bouquets from the Château parterre, would welcome back the absentee with unfeigned cordiality, and though she never exerted herself to play the rôle of hostess, would find herself listening with interest and amusement to his varied conversation.

Adrien had *vécu* to all purposes—he was not only a perfect man of the world, but nature had gifted him with a sharp intelligence, by aid of which he led his listeners into the belief that his general information was extensive and profound,

whereas in reality he was superficial to a degree, and perhaps worse educated than many of the “canaille,” whom he would willingly have crushed beneath the heel of his contempt. He was a vain man too, both personally and mentally, and wonderfully confident in his own attractive powers. In the game which he was playing, he had weighed the best course to pursue, and laying out a clear plan of action, he never allowed impulse to lead him away from the strict rules he had drawn out. He had come to the conclusion that it was advisable to rely entirely on his own merits to win the prize he had in view ; therefore he never attempted to disguise beneath ostentatiousness, the really empty condition of his coffers ; but contrived to surround his poverty with such a halo of romance,

that instead of the Baronet and his daughter regarding him as the needy adventurer he really was, he took up in their eyes a sort of position like a Prince Nonpareil in a fairy tale, and they pitied him as an ill-used “Bayard” unjustly deprived of wealth and honours, when he *ought* to have been capricious Dame Fortune’s darling child, to be clothed in purple and gold, and to be feasted on Olympian nectar.

It is not an uncommon occurrence, however, in these times, that a bankrupt Adonis, *soigné*, *chaussé*, and *ganté* to perfection, is, in spite of the fact that it is his own wicked extravagance that has reduced him, oftener an object of pity and sympathy to the world, than the poor, shivering wretch clothed in un-

seemly rags, barely shodden, and unpleasing to look upon.

As the weeks wore on, the Count, in a truly diplomatic fashion of his own that expressed much, but made no direct avowals, brought Sir John's rather obtuse mind to bear on the fact that, all parties willing, an arrangement might be entered into, which would be productive of mutual benefits. And he managed to insinuate, gracefully and delicately enough, that although there was no desire on his part to deny the acceptability of Violet's dowry, he could yet offer in exchange the undivided homage of his heart, and a name that, ranking high amongst the *ancien noblesse* of France, had ever rested unsullied by speck or stain.

Père Chesterton was naturally of a selfish disposition, and as age crept

on apace, self grew more dominant than ever, and inclined him to meet its exactions at the sacrifice of all else.

Soon after Mephistopheles had whispered, and Faust-like Sir John had listened, he resolved to address his daughter on the subject ; but feeling uncomfortable, and even a little awkward, in broaching the matter, he deemed it advisable to get over the difficulty as speedily as possible ; so one morning, without any more circumlocution, he suddenly blurted out with—

“Vi, I suppose you intend marrying some day?”

Violet, naturally taken aback by the abruptness of the question, looked up aghast at him, and stammered out, faintly—

“Why should I, papa?”

“Why *should* you? Why, because it is the correct thing for every woman to do, to be sure! I call it positively *infra dig.* that a Chesterton should tamely submit to be stigmatized as a contemptible spinster, whom no man has cared to appropriate as a wife! Or, worse still, that it should be whispered abroad that Miss Chesterton is a puling, love-sick thing, wearing the willow for a base scoundrel.”

“Papa, *don’t*,” faltered the girl, in low, deprecating accents, lifting up her tearful eyes imploringly to his face.

“Well, well, I wont. But, now, why can’t you take the Count St. Gérard for a husband?”

“The Count *St. Gérard!*” repeated Vi,

slowly. The name burst like a thunder-clap on her ear, for she had certainly never dreamt of him as a suitor, and much less as a husband. “Gracious Heavens!—a husband!” she muttered to herself. That word did indeed bring home to her heart, more than anything else could have done, how entirely her life seemed to be drifting away from Maurice’s—how utterly hopeless her love was for him! And yet she knew full well that the hopelessness of the feeling had not diminished one iota its intensity and depth. Could she bring herself to become the bride of one man, when her whole soul was filled by the image of another—when the merest trifles of every-day life recalled the past in which *he* had lived — when the faintest memory of

the vanished time lent the rose bloom to her cheek, and made her frame quiver with its unforgotten ecstasy? With these thoughts running quickly through her brain, she sat as it were in a trance,—a beatific reverie—her hands clasped fervently together, her eyes fixed on vacancy, her heart far, far away with “him,” the beloved, whose tones and touch, even in imagination, possessed more power over her being, than the sweetest love-whispers on another man’s tongue—the tenderest pressure of another man’s hand.

Down from “Olympus to Hades” fell she when her father resumed, in a terse, business-like tone—

“What say you to my proposition? True, St. Gérard has no fortune, but we can supply that deficiency. In every

other requisite, as far as I am capable of judging, he is perfectly eligible. I am sure he likes you.”

“Likes, but he does not *love* me,” murmured poor Violet.

Was she, after all then, to give herself to one, who feeling no love for her, could neither understand nor appreciate her? Was she indeed doomed to lead the cold and matter-of-fact existence that a *mariage de convenance* naturally entailed? Had the love that had once opened before her such a vista of happiness, died for ever and ever out of her life?

“‘Loves’ you, if the word pleases you better,” remarked Sir John, in a pithy, sententious manner peculiar to himself; and he added, with a sarcastic smile on his lips—“But I fancied, in your

present frame of mind, that you would prefer leaving sentiment out of the question altogether. Women are such absurdly romantic creatures! By the Lord! it makes one sick to see them for ever brooding unhealthily over some maudlin nonsense or other. No sooner does one prop for their hearts fail them, than they must cling on to another one, or fancy they are going to die. Your mother was the only sensible woman I ever saw, and she took a right view of matrimony: money, title, and good old blood to commence housekeeping with, and the affection is sure to come afterwards. As long as a fellow is well born and well bred, what on earth can any reasonable being desire more?"

"Papa, what do we really know of

this man? He may be an impostor, or anything,” suggested Vi, in a trembling voice, dreading lest the vials of the crusty old gentleman’s wrath should be poured down on her devoted head for daring to deprecate his pet.

“‘An impostor, or anything!’—that’s just like women’s foolish generalities!” sneered Sir John. “What do you mean by ‘anything?’ I suppose I have lived long enough in the world to be able to discriminate between a gentleman and a sham! I’ll wager that St. Gérard has excellent principles and ideas, inasmuch as they often coincide with my own; and as to his morality, we have ample opportunity of judging of that, considering that, when Paris is within easy distance, he prefers passing his time here. Now, Vi, just reflect a

little, and give me an answer to-morrow, like a good and sensible girl. You are inclined to be impulsive, you know. Now, impulse is all very well sometimes ; but 'reason' is better. I don't wish you to sacrifice yourself for *my* pleasure or comfort; but I *do* desire this match, and if you agree, you will be doing your duty to me, and the knowledge of that ought to give you happiness, if nothing else does."

Twenty-four hours to decide the fate of a lifetime! Speedy work, truly, for a woman's bewildered brain ; and yet before twelve of the twenty-four had elapsed, Violet had resolved on her destiny. She would marry the Count, for her remaining parent seemed bent on her doing so, and she had already

suffered sufficiently from remorse for having set herself up undutifully against the wishes of the mother who was gone from her for ever. She was indifferent to Adrien ; but that fact rather aided than otherwise in her resolution, for she felt she could not have borne to confess, even to herself, that any feeling savouring of infidelity to Maurice, was dawning in her breast. She knew that to her dear friends, the Gordons, her conduct would appear inconsistent and inexplicable, in having ruptured her engagement with the English Peer, just for the simple reason that she could not love him, and then to wed a foreigner, of whom she knew nothing, and for whom she felt nothing. Arthur would laugh, and assert, in his own *insouciant* way — “*Femme souvent*

varie, fol qui s'y fie;" but Letty, loyal, true-hearted little woman, would feel just a *soupçon* of contempt for one, who could be guilty of such vacillation.

But what did it matter what any one thought of her? She was herself the best judge of her actions, for reasons that she could hardly reveal to other ears. Adrien had the advantage over Lord Harcourt in several points. In linking herself to him, she would be separating herself entirely from England and all its painful associations. Adrien's temper was apparently as difficult to ruffle as his hair, and his extreme good breeding would never permit of any violent demonstration of feeling on his part. It was true that, notwithstanding all his politeness, he

had forgotten to *feign*, at any rate, a little love for her, instead of looking upon her, as he evidently did, like a bale of goods for barter. She had inspired love in many men who had been thrown considerably less into her society than the Count, and it was far from gratifying to her *amour propre* that he had remained so perfectly insensible or impervious. But, after all, perhaps it was fortunate that he was so, for he would probably leave her to pursue the even tenor of her way unnoticed and unmolested ; and he would civilly accept any exertion on her part for his comfort, but never exact from her the “wifely” affection that it was quite impossible for her to give.

Once consenting to wed him, she

made up her mind to endeavour to do her duty towards him, swearing to try and chase away each thought of Maurice from her heart as quickly as it entered therein ; but the “ Spirit that flew up to Heaven’s chancery with that oath blushed as he gave it in, and the recording angel, as he wrote it down, dropped a tear upon the word, and blotted it out for ever !”





CHAPTER VIII.

GO TO HIM, ROBERT!

“Oh, God ! it is a fearful thing
To see the human soul take wing
In any shape, in any mood.”

Byron.

“The rude wind is singing
The dirge of the music dead ;
The cold worms are clinging
Where kisses were lately fed.”

Shelley.

DIN an attic of a small
mean-looking house, situated
in the cheapest and most
densely crowded purlieu of a miserable

suburb, on a low and wretched pallet bed, a woman lay dying. The chamber, which could barely boast of more dimensions than a cupboard, was apparently totally devoid of the very commonest necessaries of life. The dull, dirty floor was bare, and a straw-bottomed chair and rickety table, that composed the whole of the furniture, stood near the empty grate; whilst the broken panes of the narrow window, glued over with sheets of newspaper all soiled and stained with a long accumulation of smoke and dust, let in great draughts of wind that howled round the room with a melancholy and dreary wail, just as though it were a mournful requiem for a departing soul. The few shabby shreds of clothing that still remained out of the clutches of the pawnbroker down the street were

huddled together untidily over the shivering, emaciated form; and few would have succeeded in recognising without difficulty, in the wan, whitened face that lay on the coarse flock pillow, the once resplendent beauty of poor Lucy Welland, had it not been for the still luxuriant, waving masses of hair that fell tangled and red about her shoulders, and the peculiar grey eyes fringed with black lashes. Those eyes had a dim and glazed look about them now, however, and the carmine-coloured, sensuous lips were pale and parted asunder, showing the strong white teeth, set firmly beneath them, as though in pain.

Lucy had fallen gradually deeper and deeper into the depths of the most abject poverty, since the illness which had caused her discharge from the

theatre, and which had debarred her from procuring any means of subsistence. She was “down with the fever”—a typhoid epidemic that was mowing down lives by the dozen, and quickly depopulating the filthy and closely-packed neighbourhood; and want of strength, and the “where-withal” to pay for medical advice, had allowed the poison to circulate in her veins, until human efforts were futile in arresting its rapid progress.

The very slender resources that had been left to her on falling ill, had quickly been entirely exhausted by the habitual extravagance of the spendthrift, whom she had never ceased loving all the past long years, and whom she would have died for, sooner than have deserted. Now, when but a few short fleeting hours of life were all that were left to

her upon earth, the erring woman had still the unutterable consolation of the sole presence she yearned for, and, what seemed to her, the inexpressible happiness, of dying with her hand fast clasped in his.

He was kneeling beside her bed; and, unfeeling and selfish scoundrel as he undoubtedly was, in whom lapse of time had but ripened wickedness, and rendered more hard and callous, he yet dashed away from time to time, a few genuine bitter drops of regret, as he watched the light gradually fading out of the only pair of eyes that had never looked coldly or indifferently upon him; and felt the lips, that had never uttered a harsh word or rebuke to him, but had, like a spaniel, caressed the hand of the master who beat him, growing icy as

marble beneath the touch of his own.

A long, long silence, so painful to bear, that he broke it at length in low affectionate tones, hoping to rouse her gently from a state of half insensibility, into which she appeared to relapse at intervals.

“Lucy, my poor girl! you are not worse?”

“Worse, Robert? I am dying—dying fast, dear! I feel it! I know it!—and the only thing that grieves me now is the thought of leaving you! Robert, before I *do* die, I *must* speak to you of something”—and she paused and grasped his hand tightly, whilst her dimmed eyes dilated and shone for an instant with the flashing light of the days gone by—“something that seems to lie

so heavy on my mind, sleeping or waking!"

"Yes, yes," he whispered, soothingly, thinking that her brain slightly wandered, from the fever, "you *shall* speak, but not now,—when you are better. Lie still and rest, and who knows but you may recover yet!" he added, hoarsely, as he met the poor piteous eyes turned full upon him with an expression that made his heart bleed.

"Recover! *never*, Robert! Listen to me, dear!" And, with a transitory accession of strength, she raised herself on the pillow and spoke both eagerly and excitedly, her cheek flushing, her brain clear, but her words falling so disjointedly that Minton could with difficulty recognise their purport for some time. "I was false, wicked, not to you,

but to 'him'—my husband that was, you know! And now, when life seems to be slipping away so fast—*so* fast—from me, and death looks so dreadfully terrible sometimes, I keep on thinking of him. I feel as if, somehow, I should be more fit to go away, if I knew that he would hear that I was sorry for having deceived him so!—that my death left him free to be happy with another woman; for you know, Robert, my conduct spoilt his life for him! What did he write to me?" And she pushed aside her hair and contracted her brow, as she tried to tax the memory that was failing fast:—" 'I made his life cold and dark and dreary!' Oh, those words! they are for ever running in my head now, and make it feel so hot—*so* hot!

Go to him, Robert; find him wherever he is. His real name is not Mark Leslie, but Maurice Lynn. Give him a message from the dead: tell him that with my last breath I begged his pardon for my sin. Robert, *will* you do this, that I may die in peace?"

"Yes, my dear, everything you wish shall be done," promised Minton, and for a while he lost himself in calculations as to the extent of the purchase-money Lynn would be induced to pay down for the news he would have to take him, premising Lucy *did* die.

The woman answered him by a grateful glance, and a wan smile crossed her features as she murmured—

"Poor fellow! my death will be a

blessing to him, if my life has been his curse. I *hope* he will forgive me!"

"Lucy, are your thoughts to be only of him?" Minton asked her, reproachfully, selfish to the last, and jealous even of the poor, helpless, almost lifeless, human clay that lay before him.

He could not bear the idea that any other but himself should fill the thoughts of the faithful creature who had clung to him with such unerring fidelity through all the chances and changes—the terrible miseries of the past time. Always the same to him, in sunshine and in shade; bearing up, for his sake and comfort, with noble and invariable patience, under the hardship and destitution that would have

rendered most beings brutal and reckless; working incessantly, night and day, to ensure him a hearty meal, whilst her own fast lasted unbroken for hours; striving to secure for him even the tawdry and showy garments that he loved, whilst her own feet were barely shodden, and rags and tatters, carefully patched together, hung upon her shoulders; meeting him after his lengthy absences with a smile forced upon her lips, though sorrow lay heavy and sore upon her heart; cheering him with bright and pleasant words, when not a single spark of hope animated her own poor breast.

Without wishing to show any disrespect for the *savants* of the ancient time, it must be averred that the following sentence decidedly does not

apply in every case — *Neque fæmina amissâ pudicitiâ, alia abnuerit*; for although Lucy had deeply erred in her relations with Robert Minton, she was far from being utterly worthless: she even possessed a fund of unselfishness and self-abnegation that many a good and pure woman entirely lacks. It was true that she was not Minton's wife; but no wife could have been more faithful to the core, than she was to the man to whom no tie but love bound her.

She felt no weariness in serving him, never owning a thought of self. Her ear, sensitive to the sensitiveness that is peculiar to blindness, caught his slightest wish almost ere it was uttered; and over and over again, when he lay in a senseless stupor, most times caused

by excess, in lieu of the loathing with which many would have regarded him, brought down, as he was wont to be, to the level of the brute, or helpless as an infant, with bloated countenance and imbecile gaze, or muttering aloud with the thickened accents and wild contortions of delirium tremens, she would hang over him with the deep tenderness that a mother feels for her child, tending him carefully—her step so noiseless, her eyes never closing in sleep, her voice hushed down soft and low, her tones replete with all the pity, the comfort, the devotion that one human heart can bestow upon another.

“No, dear,” she whispered, faintly, with all the earnestness that her waning strength allowed, “my last thoughts,

my whole love, are yours, as they have been since the very first—you always, and you only! But I am tired, Robert, tired and weak; everything seems to be swimming round me. Help me to lie down, Robert!—you always—you only!” she kept repeating over and over again softly, as she sank back and shut her eyes wearily.

Minton loved her as much as his gross nature would allow of, and, watching beside her, his breast swelled with a certain amount of grief and anxiety; but selfishness predominated in him above all. Bending over the low pallet, in the shadow of the solitary tallow candle that flickered away its last expiring rays in a bottle in a corner of the room, he counted the long, dull hours, and awaited with impatience the

coming of early day ; and his eyes grew very heavy, his spirit rebelled against his dreary task, and he longed to give way to the sleep that seemed to overpower him.

The night wore slowly on and on, and silence and utter darkness reigned in the miserable room. Only the breathing on the bed sounded terribly fitful, and the outline of the sufferer looked shadowy to the watcher who knelt beside her, rising occasionally from his cramped position to renovate himself with a draught of the spirit that stood in a medicine phial on the narrow mantelshelf hard by. Through the paper-patched panes the first pale glimmering of dawn could be faintly traced in the sky, when Minton,

worn out by his long vigil, and his limbs benumbed with cold, roused himself, and bent over Lucy with a searching gaze ; but he started back again with horror, for the great grey eyes glared upwards, but had, for the very first time since he had looked upon them, no love for him in their distended pupils ; and the hand that he had taken, fell heavily and nervelessly back on the dingy coverlid, without rendering him so much as a faint responsive pressure !





CHAPTER IX.

ASPASIA'S REVENGE.

“She, though in full-blown flower of glorious beauty,
Grows cold even in the summer of her age!”

Dryden.

“I feel like one who treads alone
Some banquet-hall deserted,
Whose lights are fled,
Whose garland's dead,
And all but he departed.”

Moore.

HE prelude of a very brief courtship, is all that is essential to a *mariage de convenance*; so Violet Chesterton in a little time became the Countess St.

Gérard and mistress of the dilapidated château. Money, however, soon renovated the place, and half a dozen powdered lacqueys performed the functions that the two grey-headed retainers had for many a past year fulfilled. The first six months of wedded life, if not productive of any excess of happiness, had at any rate brought no sorrow to Vi. Reversing the usual order of things in this sublunary sphere, Adrien as a Benedict, was infinitely more devoted than he had been as a lover; and although Violet's feelings towards him were none of the warmest, giving a flat denial to the assertion of him who say, "*Si vis amari, ama,*" yet she certainly felt neither dislike nor distaste to the man who assiduously strove to indulge each errant fancy she expressed. True, no zealous

wifely attachment to him had yet sprung up in her breast, but a hope had already dawned upon her mind that time, "which often heals when reason cannot," united to Adrien's own intrinsic merits, would bring forgetfulness of the past and happiness in the future.

A *mariage de convenance* in France is far removed from what is called an "union of souls," and it seldom offers to the world examples of fidelity on the part of either husband or wife. But Adrien's *ménage* was scarcely conducted on French *laisser aller* principles. He had quickly learnt to idolize his fair young wife, and to fear any *escandale* that might break the happy new life that had opened before him. Since his marriage, he and Mademoiselle Vernet had never met, although it was

but a matter of a few leagues that separated them.

Besides the sincere desire he felt to preserve religiously intact the vows he had sworn at the altar, and which he knew he should infringe in the letter, if not in the spirit, by a renewal of acquaintance with his ex-mistress, he had also a wholesome dread, after the fashion of his sex, of a tempestuous scene, which a meeting with the imperious Zulma, after his protracted absence, would naturally arouse, and he feared the avalanche of alternate reproach and tenderness which the beautiful *Lionne* would undoubtedly shower down upon his head. “From the deepest desire often ensues the deadliest hate ;” and Adrien’s sentiments for the woman who had but a short time back

wreathed her pearly arms round his neck, and pressed her glowing cheek to his, would, on analysation, have been discovered to have three component parts : disgust for her, horror of her class, and self-contempt for having lingered so long in her chains. So utter a detestation for her filled him, that his whole soul revolted, as it were, at the very recollection of the hours spent in that blue and silver den of vice, of which sparkling bumpers of Burgundy, and iniquitous discourse on ruby lips, were the principal attractions. But such poisonous sweets were over for him now, and healthy food and an honest life were his, if he cared to have them.

Violet's munificent dowry had cleared off all old scores of debt from the St,

Gérard estate ; and Sir John, in his partiality for his son-in-law, had settled a large sum upon him, annexed with one proviso, which was—that in case of any event causing a separation between man and wife, the money should revert to Violet, and after her death to any issue there might be of the marriage. Biding the event of marital differences, and a “division in the house,” the sum in question was to be expended by the Count St. Gérard on his sole will and pleasure—“pin-money,” in fact, by which the expensive and luxurious tastes inherent in his nature could be satisfied. And for once in a way, contentment and desires accomplished, went hand in hand. The *vole* Frenchman, seeking excitement abroad, was transformed into a model for “stay-at-home” Britishers,

and a tame cat could not have surpassed him in his devotion to the domestic hearth.

Violet had unconsciously glided into a routine of household duties, that were more agreeable than onerous. Now and then the remembrance of Maurice would bring a sigh ; but it would be valiantly smothered in its birth, and the beams of the sun shining down upon Versailles, would oftener kiss a smile upon her lips, than dry a tear from the eyes that had begun to reassume their wonted expression of serenity.

Then one day a letter came to Adrien.

For several hours after its receipt he sat moody and silent, either answering in curt monosyllables or scarcely heeding the conversation of

his wife and her father. Violet saw him destroy the missive furtively, crushing the fragments under his foot with a vehemence that was utterly foreign to his nature. After all vestige of the offending document had been removed out of sight, he became himself again; smiling, unruffled, suave as ever; and Violet, not loving him enough to be jealous or unduly curious, welcomed back the sunshine, and cared not to penetrate into the temporary cloud that had enveloped him.

After this little episode, a month rolled by, its course undisturbed by aught, and then the postman's livery was to be seen oftener gleaming under the avenue of horse-chestnuts that led up to the house, and his tread resounded on the paved courtyard, and budget after budget

reached Adrien's hand; and after the perusal of each, the black shadow deepened more and more upon his face, and his manner, losing completely the ease that had distinguished it, became restless and painfully nervous.

Violet began to watch and to wonder, and her laugh sounded more seldom and less heartfelt than before.

She did not love her husband, but her feelings for him were made up of so much esteem and respect that they were an excellent counterfeit of affection. Women are perverse creatures at best, and not very reasonable in their requisitions; so, although there was no particular *tendresse* for him in *her* heart, she felt that she could not bear indifferently or quietly the knowledge that *his* heart was false to her. All their

wedded life had been velvety in its smoothness; but the sea is never so treacherous as after a dead calm; and the storm that had long been brewing from the Quartier Bréda burst suddenly overhead.

Adrien was under a promise to transact some business for Sir John in Paris, in the completion of which a few days would necessarily elapse.

On the morning of his departure, Vi, entering the saloon noiselessly, found him plunged in a profound reverie, with a “far-off,” forlorn look in his deep-blue eyes, that touched his wife with pity. Going up to him, she placed her hand on his shoulder, saying affectionately—

“What ails you, Adrien?”

She was generally so little demonstrative towards him, that even the

trifling inflection of tenderness in her tone shot a thrill of happiness through him, and, putting his arm round her, he snatched her to his breast and kissed her passionately. The next instant he released her and turned away, and a slight sensation of disappointment crept up into her mind as he did so.

“Nothing is the matter, Violet,” he answered, quietly, “except that I was moralizing a little here—thinking how bright the outward world appears, and yet how delusive everything is in reality. There is nothing real and lasting but misery, I believe! But I don’t want to infect you with my *vapeurs noirs, ma belle*,” he added, trying to recover his usual accents of persiflage; “you, whose beauty should always be clad in smiles. God knows, if it lay in my power to

avert evil, grief should never lay its heavy hand upon you!"

"I know it, Adrien! You are very good to me, and I have done nothing to deserve it. I never deceived you; I told you long ago that my heart was dead, lying in the grave of a vanished time, but you have made me care for you *now*, Adrien, more than I ever thought I *could* care for any creature breathing. You have been so forbearing to me, so considerate; and I feel that you are so much more noble, so much better than other men!"

"No, dear! not better, nor so good, alas! But whatever I have done of wrong was done before I knew you—before I learnt that it is quite impossible to pursue vice and happiness at the same time! Your purity, your innocence, have

shown me the true hideousness of the women who, with angel forms, possess devils' hearts—whose allurements are as powerful as their touch is pollution! Violet, I am leaving you for a few days, but I do wish I was not going, for a strange presentiment of ill haunts me, and I cannot shake it off. Before I go I should like to hear just once from your lips that you *believe* in me with all your heart; that if I have unfortunately failed in awakening love, I have at least gained your entire confidence."

"My poor Adrien! what *can* have come over you? You are usually so hopeful and light-hearted that I have often envied you your temperament. Of course, I have every confidence in you!"

What have you ever done to forfeit it?"

"Nothing, I trust, my dear one, and, Heaven helping, I never will ! Do you know, Violet, I never could have believed that the cold, *insouciant* Adrien St. Gérard of a few years back, would have become what he is now, the passionate admirer of the sweetest little woman in creation—the slave of his own wife ! Shades of my forefathers, look not too contemptuously upon your recreant scion ! A generation or two ago, the St. Gérards were queer folks, and unenviably notorious for their intrigues ; my great-grandfather was shot through the heart in a duel with his best friend, because a profligate wanton divided her smiles between them. But no amount of Circe

blandishment could affect me now, for my wife is all the world to me! Nothing could make me forget her!"

"Dear Adrien!"—and Violet's heart fluttered for the first time, when he leant down and pressed his parting kiss upon her mouth.

She threw herself into a fauteuil by the open casement after he had left her. Her present home was a very fair one to look upon. Her eyes rested dreamily upon the old classic fountain, and the regal lilies that floated on the surface of the basin. The sun rode high in the heavens, the bees and butterflies were busy amongst the flowers, the sky was a mass of turquoise, and the trees and the bushes breathed out low and pleasant whisperings to each other.

“ How good he is ! ” she soliloquized. “ How worthy of all the love that most women could feel for him ; but I ! —oh ! Maurice ! you have much to answer for—why did I meet you but to lose you, to have my life ruined for ever ? Adrien ought to be everything to me, yet he is not ! Still, if anything parted us now, I think I should be very unhappy. Pshaw ! ” she exclaimed, “ what *could* part us, unless I found he was not what I think him ? and in that case, alas ! my feelings for him are not strong enough to make me cling to him in spite of all ! I wish he was back again ! I do believe he has transferred his presentiment of evil to *my* heart ! ”

“ Un paquet pour Madame la Contesse ; ” and the pompous flunkey gravely delivered

into her hand a large envelope. The superscription was in a crabbed foreign caligraphy, and it was sealed with the free motto of a Reine Gaillarde, "*Je me moque de tous.*" Violet paused ere she opened it; an undefinable hesitation to look inside came over her. Then summoning up resolution, she hastily tore the cover, and some dozen letters, in her husband's well-known writing, fell on the floor at her feet.

With trembling fingers and blanched cheeks she stooped and gathered them up—then seated herself to examine the contents.

All contained ardent protestations to Zulma Vernet, the actress, the courtesan, that all the world had heard of—the most notorious woman in Paris.

In black and white lay the cruel

truth staring her in the face, leaving no shadow of doubt as to the nature of the relations existing between the parties ; and the writer of these vile productions was—Adrien ! the immaculate, the irreproachable !

Violet remained immovable, her under lip tightly compressed by her little white teeth, her fingers nervously interlaced together.

Were all men deceivers ? she wondered ; was the entire world a sham—a mockery ? was she never to reach a haven of peace ? This was the second time that falsehood had been the cause of unhappiness to her, but this time the sin of deceit presented itself before her in a far more aggravated form than before. Maurice had deceived her ; but love for her, dread of her loss, had been the motives

of his falsehood, but her husband was nothing but a living lie, fair to look upon, foul to the very core! he was a professed libertine, and one of a type she bitterly abhorred. An idea almost amounting to a certainty suddenly struck her, perhaps the *liaison* of which she held the proofs had been broken off before his marriage, perhaps at any rate Adrien had not been criminal enough to persevere in a course which not only dishonoured him but his wife!

Seizing the documents, she scrutinized them as carefully as she could, with blinding tears obstructing her vision and a faintness all over her ; but no hope for her was realized in those pages. The dates of the letters stood plain and clear like hieroglyphics of fire before her, the last letter dated the 14th

of June ; this was the 21st, so it had been penned just one short week before.

Zulma Vernet had willingly paid a good price to have that villainous little bit of forgery done ; without the aid of which her vengeance would have been very incomplete.

Violet was impulsive to a fault, and her resolution was formed at once. Rushing to her father with the fatal correspondence, she put it into his hands, and sobbing with mingled grief and indignation, declared her intention never to set eyes again upon the man who could deceive her so deliberately. Sir John's pride rose up in arms at once, as, eloquent in her wrath, Violet dilated on the extent of their mutual wrongs, placing before him in glowing

colours the infamy of the foreigner who had tricked and fooled them thus. The Baronet was both hot-headed and obstinate, and once thoroughly convinced that St. Gérard had but used him as a stepping-stone to the replenishment of his own finances, by which means he could supply with facility the extravagant demands of such sharks as the Vernet, he consented to carry out without delay the project Violet had formed.

* * * *

When the Count St. Gérard after a few days' sojourn in Paris returned to the château, he found it empty. Sir John and his daughter were gone, leaving no clue to their whereabouts. The footfall of the two old servants alone resounded in the deserted place.

The key to the mystery lay in a packet on the table—his own letters to Mademoiselle Zulma Vernet.

Adrien sat down face to face with his misery, and tried to call his thoughts together. Violet, the only woman who had had the power to move his feelings, had left him, probably for ever. The old skeleton of his cupboard, paucity of wealth, had returned to him; and the tide of debt would assuredly overwhelm him if he stayed to meet it. The doomed home of his fathers presented an aspect more gloomy than a felon's cell, now that the sole being he had loved had flown from it. Strangely enough it never even entered his brain to go in quest of the fugitives, and to reclaim his wife *au nom de la loi*. He knew she had never really

cared for him, and he was far too miserable and crushed in spirit to brave manfully the lashes of her scorn. He had borne her coldness, but it would be a foretaste of purgatory to endure her contempt. His short married life seemed to have been a passing but heavenly vision, in which he had for a while been lifted out of earth, and the angelic presence that had shone brightly on his home, by withdrawing its radiant light, had left him in utter darkness. He knew full well that the date of those cursed letters, those emanations of his insane folly, were nothing but forgeries; but he was powerless to unravel the intricate web of lies that had undone him. One feeling predominated over all, and that was a desire for vengeance on the vile Aspasia who had

worked the mine, leaving him utterly crushed beneath the *débris* of her deed.

But though a man of the world, he was by nature both weak and irresolute, and he lacked the energy to wrestle with his fate.

In a few weeks he had disposed of the old château and all it contained to a rich *roturier* from Paris, who, animated by the “snobbism” inherent in his class, desired to breathe the same air, that had fanned the brows of patrician generations.

Homeless and friendless, with a few hundreds in his pocket, the Count St. Gérard sailed for another land.





CHAPTER X.

A MESSAGE FROM THE DEAD.

“Without a grave, unknelled, uncoffined, and unknown.” *Byron.*

“One more unfortunate,
Weary of breath,
Rashly importunate,
Gone to her death !”
Hood.



YEAR had passed since the events of the last chapter, when Dubois, who possessed a good deal of landed property in different parts of America, arrived at New York.

On presenting his letters of introduction to one of the most influential members of society in that city, and expressing his desire to see "life" in its highest phase amongst the "Yankees," he was invited, in accordance with his wish, to form one of a party that was to be given on an ultra-magnificent scale by a Monsieur de Géronville, a wealthy French Canadian, in celebration of his *fiançailles* with the only daughter of one of the most opulent bankers of the place.

It was rather late in the evening when Dubois entered the room, in which a glittering assemblage were collected to do honour to the auspicious occasion. At one end of the brilliantly lighted *salon*, by the side of a raised daïs on which were placed the costly offerings of friends and

relations, stood the bride, a slight delicate girl of seventeen, with a pretty but pensive cast of countenance. Notwithstanding all the dignity of orange-blossoms and lace, there was a furtive shyness in her glance, and a bashfulness in her whole demeanour, that savoured infinitely more of the school-room, than of a woman entering upon the most serious epoch of her life. Close beside her was Monsieur de Géronville.

Twelve months of trouble may trace many a deep furrow on the brow, or imprint hollows in the cheek, and even sprinkle with silvery threads an ebon head; but the languid deep blue eyes of the bridegroom were unchanged, and the "*chic*" that had ever distinguished him was still visible in his *tout ensemble*.

Dubois looked again and again, rubbed his eyes, and doubted the clearness of his vision; then, after a momentary nervous hesitation, he hastily traversed the lengthy apartment, and striding up, whispered peremptorily—

“Adrien St. Gérard, leave this place before you tarnish with a foul, dis honourable action your father’s old name!—before you destroy for ever the future of the innocent creature by your side! Your wife lives; how then can you unite yourself with another woman? Plead illness—anything—to stop this mockery of a marriage, or by my soul! I’ll blow the whole thing, and denounce you before them all!”

“Hush, for God’s sake, Dubois!” Adrien implored, low but passionately.

“ Say nothing, and I give you my word this ceremony shall not proceed further. But your presence here to-night has wrecked my prospects for ever, and you will *never* look upon me again! Never dare to speak of my ‘ wife! ’—a woman with a frozen heart, who gave me a stone when I asked for bread—who hurled me to the four winds of heaven, and has but one prayer on her lips, that she may never set eyes on her hated husband more! The very thought of her unmans me!” and he struggled vainly for a moment with his agitation. “ Friends! ” he said at last, in trembling accents, turning a pallid face towards the mass of guests that were gazing in wonderment at the excited colloquy between him and the Frenchman, “ some sudden news has

overcome me. I am ill—unfit for everything—and you must pardon my leaving you! One has but little power over severe physical ailment," he strove to add quietly. "Dear Christine!" he whispered to the frightened girl, taking her hand tenderly, "you must let your own gentle heart plead for me, if my conduct is somewhat strange. To-morrow, I trust, we shall meet again," and kissing her on the forehead he left the room.

And the morrow came, with many another morrow in its wake, but the New York world never heard of Monsieur de Géronville more!

* * * *

Later, in the American war, amongst the list of "killed" on the side of the

Confederates, the name of Adrien St. Gérard stood one of the first.

From under a heap of slaughtered men they raised him, his body cold, his hair dank with the damp sod on which it had lain so long, his deep blue eyes stark open with the throes of death's last agonies. Clasped round his neck by a twisted chain, and resting close upon his heart, lay a locket. One side of it contained the picture of a woman's face—an oval face, with large radiant eyes, and speaking lips, and classic features, such as Clytie had; the other held a tiny curl of silky nut-brown hair, with the monogram—

V.S.G.

entwined in golden threads beneath it. And near the locket they found

two letters, all soaked and stiffened with crimson gore.

One was addressed to Dubois at his residence in Versailles, the other to

“ Mademoiselle Zulma Vernet,
Actrice,
Théâtre Lyrique,
à Paris.”

And this was the message that reached her from the dead!

“ Woman! you have indeed been fully avenged! With my dying breath I heap bitterest curses upon your head! May Heaven in its justice utterly blight *your* life, as you have done that of Adrien St. Gérard!”

* * * * *

She never smiled again. In spite of the ruin her vengeance had brought

upon him, he was the only man she had ever loved. But the unholy love of such women as she was, resembles a fierce fiery flame, consuming and utterly destroying the object that feeds it; and their insatiable, uncontrollable passions are like those of an untamed beast, rendered doubly rapacious and cruel by the loss of its coveted prey.

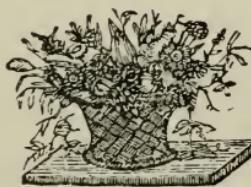
Although Adrien's fearful malediction hung heavily over her, the tide of popularity turned as suddenly as it had set in. Another, younger, fairer, *newer* than she was, usurped the position she had held so long; and the *féted*, courted daughter of success became rapidly a mere nonentity, unnoticed, forgotten by that capricious Parisian world.

When a few more years of guilt and poverty had passed away, they

dragged her out of the waters of the Seine, and put her in the dreary Morgue, side by side with the loathsome, ghastly “things” in whom death had well-nigh obliterated all semblance to humanity. Many a curious eye gazed horror-struck on the fearful sight, but no pitying face or grief-struck bosom claimed what was left of her for kith or kin, or recognised in the flaccid features and bloated form of the dead woman lying before them, the syren charms that had in life held many a heart in thrall.

Only one “sign” she gave. A little leatherne purse, fastened to her dress, and in it a paper stained with blood, on which she had inscribed, in letters that were almost illegible, “Bury this with me.”

Right upon her breast, in unison with the last desire of the poor helpless corpse, they placed the paper — and Adrien's curse rested upon her even in the narrow grave!





CHAPTER XI.

DAWN BREAKS.

“Ye gods! annihilate but space and time,
And make two lovers happy!”

Pope.

“Joy! joy! for ever! my task is done,
The gates are passed, and Heaven is won!”

Moore.

MAURICE had lingered on and on abroad, ever since that night at the Italian Opera when the face of his wife had suddenly sprung up before his startled vision. That night when he had also

looked for the last time on that *other* face, that was infinitely dearer to him than existence itself.

How well he might have ejaculated, “My death and life, my bane and antidote, *were* both before me!”

It was four long weary years ago now, and they seemed to him to have compassed half a century at least.

“O! vita misero longa, felici brevis!”

During all this time his chief aim and ambition had been to find *distraction*—that wonderful panacea for grief, according to our neighbours, the Gauls—but the task he had set himself to accomplish appeared to be utterly futile, for whether he found himself amidst the noisy and “busy

hum of cities," or in the solitude of majestic woods, nothing could cheat him of "memory."

Others of his own species succeeded in finding pleasure and gratification in the *present*. Only he—a second Cain, as it were, in his wanderings—was denied the capability of "changing,"—was refused the boon of oblivion. But *pazienza!* Peace might come at last. "Patience once wanted a nightingale; Patience waited, and the egg sang!"

He had visited in succession the glittering and gay French capital, Vienna, and Constantinople, hoping to find amusement if not happiness in the two former, and quiet enjoyment on the picturesque and classic shores of the Bosphorus; but revelry

and dissipation were distasteful to him, crowds wearied him, and silent haunts afforded too much scope for indulging in mournful retrospection. "Like an evil spirit, seeking rest and finding none," he at length retraced his steps as far as Italy, the land of love and song.

It was strange at this time, when years of absence might naturally have somewhat deadened the vividness of feeling and remembrance, how frequently Violet's image rose up before him, appearing to pursue him wherever he went. With trembling hands and a sinking heart he had unfolded the pages of the English newspapers, during the first portion of his sojourn on the Continent, dreading lest his eyes should suddenly alight on the announcement of her mar-

riage with Lord Harcourt. “Where ignorance is bliss, 'twere folly to be wise,”—an undoubted apothegm, although a hackneyed one, and applied equally in cases verging from the sublime to the ridiculous.

While uncertainty lasted, there yet lived a wee spark of hope. Unconsciously to himself, he believed in a comforting inward conviction that *le bon temps viendrait*, although inclination was father to the idea, probably.

A few light words of a postscript, to one of Reggy Peel's wild rambling effusions—specimens of caligraphy, sentiment, and eccentric flights of imagination, that would have formed appropriate companions to the parchments of Egyptian hieroglyphics and Assyrian lore in the British Museum—had told him that the

engagement was ruptured, “cause unknown,” and he breathed freely again. The tidings brought fresh strength to struggle on. It was an inexpressible consolation to know that, if not “his,” at any rate she was not another’s!

Later he read a notice of the demise of Lady Chesterton, in a fashionable obituary, accompanied by a flourishing panegyric on the manifold domestic virtues of the deplored deceased.

Then, after the lapse of several months, during which Maurice lived an “oysterish” existence, as much shut up in his shell of reserve from the rest of his species, as though he were a second Robinson Crusoe, and with the thorough conviction in his mind that all the

world had utterly forgotten him, as entirely as though he were lying some half a dozen feet deep in Kensal-green Cemetery, a letter from Lettice reached him, breaking to him gently, tenderly, in a soft womanly way, the news of Violet's marriage.

“Après cela le déluge!”

Everything became a dead blank to him ; he ate and drank, and slept and walked, but like a piece of mechanism—with no more enjoyment than as if he was a senseless dummy. No feeling, not even the capability of suffering, seemed left in his breast. Only a weary, stupid, heavy weight upon both heart and brain, that he could not muster up sufficient energy to try and cast off.

The sad story of Violet's life as a

wife had not reached him; but when nearly two years had gone by, he heard of the Countess St. Gérard's widowhood, but was left unacquainted with all the circumstances relative to her husband's death.

Few people, in fact, had a knowledge of Adrien's unfortunate career. Dubois had sent the information of his death to Sir John, but had shrunk from alluding to the meeting at New York. Now that St. Gérard's heart lay still for ever beneath the sod, it seemed cruel to expose all its graver errors to the wife who had shown herself so utterly hard and unrelenting to some venial fault; and Violet remained in ignorance of all but the fact that she was fetterless again.

“*She was free,*” Maurice thought; but

he was still bound fast as ever. Nevertheless, her sweet face was ever before him; and each day, as it began and ended, brought a greater yearning to look upon it in the flesh once more.

He sat one day in his room, with the wide expanse of the magnificent Bay of Naples spreading out its beauties before him. His eyes rested wearily on the animated scene—the Neapolitan fishermen in their many hued attire, the groups of indolent lazzaroni; the piquante, dark-eyed, olive-skinned fruit-sellers, poising gracefully upon their raven tresses their luscious burdens; the various water-craft smoothly gliding by on the deep blue water; but he really saw nothing, for his thoughts were miles and miles away, amongst the flowery

lawns, the pretty rustic homesteads, the woodland paths of the “auld countrie,” where the polar star of his life was shining. Suddenly there stole past him the well known fragrance, the perfume of violets. He pulled hastily from his breast the little embroidered handkerchief that had never left him, but time had bereft that of its pristine scent. Then he looked out of the lowly lattice and saw a tiny Zingara, —a tawny elf, with long dishevelled locks straggling from under the scarlet kerchief that served her for a coronet, and with the *grandi occhi oscuri* of her land. In one dusky hand she grasped a rough willow basket; with the other she held up a big bunch of Parma violets, crying in a shrill, plaintive tone—

“La carità, Signore! per l'amor della Santissima Vergine! un quattrino per non morir di fame!”

Maurice threw her some coins and seized the flowers.

“Il cielo v'accompagna, Signore! Siate benedetto mille volte, e che vi sia concesso di veder presto la Donna Amata.”

“Amen to that, most fervently,” he murmured to himself.

“Grazie ragazza mia, che si avverino le vostre parole.”

She glanced up roguishly at him, and dropping a coquettish courtesy, ran quickly away.

Maurice pressed the fading violets to his lips, and wondered, with the superstition which love often imbues, if they had come to him as an omen of good.

They spoke to him so sweetly of his long lost darling ; they appeared to the fevered imagination of a lover, to be even a message from her, saying—“ Come to me again ! ” Should he obey the fanciful summons, and allow the breath of a passing fragrance to lead him back ; or was it but the delusive Elysian dreaming of a poor passion-drunk soul, after all ?

Men wiser than himself had been influenced by trivial sounds and sights, why should not a familiar scent have power to sway as well ?

Had not the great Napoleon at Brienne had his attention arrested by the sound of a passing chime ? At its familiar peal, all his “ present ” had faded right out of mind—

the grandeur of his Imperial Court, the glorious triumphs of Marengo and Austerlitz, had vanished from memory ; absorbed, motionless, he had remained until the ceasing of that deep-toned bell, while floods of thought of bygone days rushed over him, and he longed for his early lowly home once more !

Was there not a national superstition even, that found an augury for weal or woe in the pure petals of the modest marguerite ?

Had not an illustrious exile, after long years of self-entailed sojourn in a distant land, been brought back to Gallia's shores by the mere sight of the beloved “ tricolor ” painted on a small scrap of trumpery board ?

Maurice determined to loiter no

longer in Italy, but crossing the Alps, commenced his homeward journey, taking Germany on his route.

One morning he awoke earlier than was his wont. Sleep came to him only in fitful snatches now; and as he approached nearer and nearer to the place that held her, a restlessness crept over him that he found it impossible to control. The sober grey dawn was faintly streaking the East with a pale rosy tinge, that gradually deepened and deepened into vivid crimson, until Phœbus, raising his glowing disc, levelled his fiery beams full upon the pellucid river, until it seemed to blush and blush again beneath his passionate glance.

The Rhine, with all its multifarious charms, lay before Maurice's gaze: the

lovely, often-repeated, but never wearying scenery of its banks, presenting a perpetuity of villages and vineyards which at each bend and turn of the enchanting river unfold themselves to view; the valleys, winding and extensive, enclosed with grounds, rising and falling boldly and irregularly, with just here and there a sharp craggy rock beetling above all and pointing heavenward. Now a deep brown shadow enveloping everything, from the sky down to the very feet of the mirrored shrubs; then a glorious snatch of sunlight gleaming up cultivated slopes, and showing up the prettiest landscape Nature can produce.

Maurice stood and looked, with the soft green grass beneath him, the waving corn, the luxuriant spreading

vines, the noble trees around him; and even in so paradisiacal a scene the sad remembrance stole over him, that close lay a heart that had lived and beat, and probably suffered the same emotions as his own was doing, until death had released it from all earthly cares and trammels; for near that spot the brave Turenne had fallen, and within a tiny chapel hard by, under its humble altar, the gallant warrior slept the last long sleep that knows of no awakening. But not for long could the melancholy reflections that the surroundings engendered, the sufferings of dead heroes, the plaintive legends of the Rheingau, occupy the mind of one whose thoughts revolved round and round the axle of one thing alone—the image of a bright and living woman.

A few more days would find him near her, but alas! only to hover like a miserable thief in the night, for a glimpse of the treasure he coveted beyond all, but was utterly powerless to steal. It would appear to him as though he stood at the gates of Eden “disconsolate;” but instead of an “angel with a flaming sword” debarring his entrance therein, it was a fiend in human form, who with devilish work had blasted all the sweetest hopes and joys, that might have blossomed in this vale of tears.

Still it would be something to inhale the same air she breathed, to tread the earth that the touch of her foot had rendered holy in his eyes, and more precious than Australian fields to the worshippers of gold.

The white chalky cliffs of Dover were a pleasant sight to him. It was so long ago since he had last seen them, and his heart felt lighter and his spirits more buoyant as he stepped upon his native ground.

Imagination was fertile within him as he was whirled along through the familiar scenery of his route. By the time he reached London, Pegasus had carried him almost as high up as the apex of his earthly desires, and it seemed cruel to make him dismount from his flying steed, after a voyage into the land of fancies, by one of those trivial commonplace incidents of everyday life that so often arise to turn romance into reality. In the play of "Masks and Faces," when that consummate artist, Webster, as Triplet,

clothed in rags, and with fast unbroken, loses all remembrance of his sufferings, in the fiction that is born of his own brain, and is awakened from his dreaming by a child's piteous cry for bread ; what can be more heartrending and affecting than the poor comedy-writer's sudden transition from the shadowy regions of romance to the terrible and startling realities of life ?

Maurice had quietly secured the first available vehicle, desiring his luggage to be brought to him ; but in the confusion attendant on the arrival of a full train a package belonging to him had become mislaid. Anxious to reach his old quarters, where letters from absent friends, news of "her," might be waiting him, he impatiently assisted in the search for the missing property.

“What sort of box is it, sir?” interrogated one of the porters. “Any name upon it?”

“A portmanteau, with Lynn, Maurice Lynn; there it is. Make haste, my man.” And Maurice walked hurriedly forwards.

“Stop a bit, not so fast,” said a coarse voice in his ear, whilst a man’s hand gave a rough pull to his coat sleeve.

Looking up in amazement at the familiarity of the address and cursory mode of impeding his progress, and wondering what old acquaintance had suddenly dropped down upon him in the very identical moment when he had least time to spare, he saw standing beside him a man of immense proportions—a swarthy Goliath—whose dark face shone more darkly still from beneath the slouchy

brim of a “Jim Crow” that was pressed low upon the brow, throwing a dusky shade over the sunburnt complexion and the disordered beard that graced the chin. A pair of gloveless hands, not over-scrupulously clean, betokened the “ungentleness” of his birth, and he was clad in a coat that was unmistakeably seedy and out of elbows, while his whole aspect bore the stamp of a very unpleasant ruffian, capable of picking your pocket or cutting your throat with the same indifference and facility to himself. Maurice stared hard at the fellow for a minute or two, but failed in recalling his face. Fourteen years of a hard and profligate life had made sufficiency of alteration in Robert Minton’s features to afford ample excuse for the deficiency in Lynn’s memory;

but the first few words that fell from the lips of his burly addresser, soon brought to his recollection the low rival of his boyish passion.

“I have spotted you at last then, and a fine dance I have had after you,” he began; “but no matter, ‘all’s well that ends well,’ and I have bagged my game now! Look ye here, Mr. Leslie,” he continued, speaking rapidly and menacingly, “you have managed to elude the law of England long enough — the law that doesn’t allow honest men to desert their wives, leaving them to starve, maybe, unless the parochial authorities come down with summut. Now, you can’t enjoy the blessedness of being single without paying for the privilege, you know!”

“ You are under a mistake ; my

name is not Leslie," Maurice answered, quietly.

" Well, it's Lynn, then!—'what's in a name?' &c.—it's all one as long as I have the right man. Now, what are you going to give me for keeping your whereabouts dark, and preventing David Welland from getting on your scent and worritting you to your grave?"

David Welland had been run over by a heavy dray, when dead drunk, and had been slumbering in a petty cemetery in the outskirts of London for many a long year.

" Give you ? nothing whatever !" replied Maurice, looking the bully coolly in the face, but with a desperate longing within him to send him measuring his long length on the platform,

even at the risk of soiling his fingers by such pollution.

“Nothing ! then by God I'll stick to you like a leech until you stump up something to be rid of me ! I am *starving*, do you hear ? literally starving, and I haven't a penny piece in my pocket to buy a mouthful of bread. It's all very well for you canting aristocrats to think a man ought to work —but you never think that there is no work to do—workhouses and reformatories are the only remedies for hunger that this liberal country affords—and the poor hate them, and often prefer the portals of the tomb to the doors of those places ; but if starvation don't make a man do anything else, it makes him like a wild beast, fit for any desperate deed.”

And over the ill-looking face came a hungry wolfish expression that was corroborative of his words, and that moved Lynn's heart with a strange pity for the wretch who had been the primary cause of all his misery, the man whom he knew to be a worthless scamp, and the paramour of his faithless wife. Taking a sovereign out of his purse, he handed it to him.

“Now go, and don't waste your time on me; threats never had any effect upon me yet; it's sheer compassion for a starving fellow creature that procures you this.”

Robert Minton clutched the coin eagerly, the glitter of gold had not shone in his palm for many and many a day; and moving off a

pace or two, his eyes regularly gloated on its yellow lustre. Suddenly he retraced his steps and whispered in a concentrated tone—

“If threats wont move you, what will you give for good news ?”

Maurice gazed at him bewildered. Good news indeed ! what news could be good to him, fettered hand and foot as he was ? except—Ah ! he chased the thought rapidly away. Pshaw ! he thought, only a trick to extort money.

“Now look here, my good fellow, I am not accustomed to being trifled with, or played upon. If you *have* anything to say, speak out boldly and demand your price, and if the information is worth having, I'll pay for it in reason.”

“ Suppose then that I were to tell you that you will never be troubled by Lucy more, that you may go free, that in fact your wife is—dead!”

“ Dead !” echoed Maurice, whilst his breath came fast and his utterance grew thick and husky. “ Dead ! but no, it’s nothing but a sham, a trick. What proof have you of your words ?” he demanded, sternly.

“ Look at this !” and Minton drew gingerly from his tattered pocket-book a soiled document, which he carefully unfolded and flourished before Lynn’s eyes.

Maurice scanned it hastily. It was a certificate of death copied from the register of St. Nicholas in the Fields. Strangely enough, the very church in which the deceased woman

had been married fourteen years before.

“How much do you want?”

“Fifty pounds.”

“I’ll give you twenty-five pounds down in exchange for that document, and the balance on your meeting me to-morrow at noon at St. Nicholas in the Fields, after I have thoroughly satisfied myself that your information is correct, and that there is no imposition for the mere extortion of money.”

“Agreed, sir; I’ll take your word for the remainder of the sum being paid down to me within twenty-four hours.” And Minton walked rapidly away with the notes in his grasp, but entirely forgot to give poor Lucy’s last message. What recked he of the words of a dead woman when he had just had

the unprecedented luck of selling the certificate of her death for the munificent sum of fifty pounds?

Maurice stood spellbound, with his eyes riveted on the precious proof of his freedom, for which he would have willingly paid treble the amount.

“*My* Violet! my *own* now!” he murmured, with trembling lips and a swelling heart.

“Not while *she* lived; but, great Heavens! death itself has been merciful, and the dawn of happiness has broken at last!”



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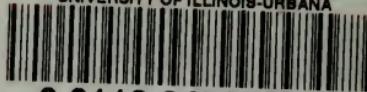
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